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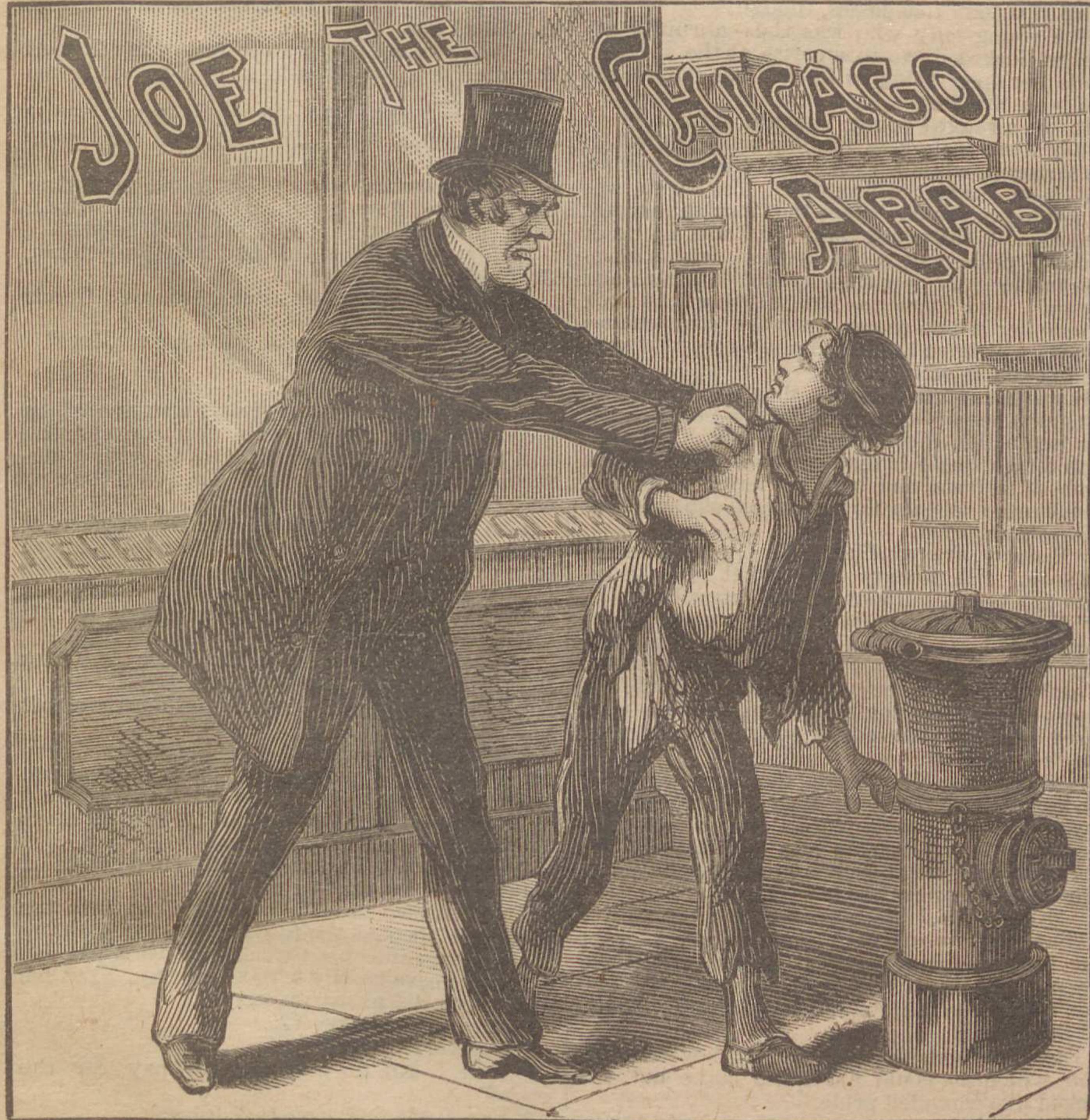
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IN AN INSTANT THE ENRAGED GENTLEMAN HAD CAUGHT JOE BY THE COLLAR, AND
WAS SHAKING HIM FURIOUSLY.

Joe, the Chicago Arab;

OR,

A BOY OF THE TIMES.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BILLY BAGGAGE," "JOLLY JIM,"
"WILL WILDFIRE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

JOE'S LUNCH ROUTE.

"If you on'y know'd how hungry I was you'd stop that there fun, square off. Don't I know? You'd streak inter the kitchen, and chop me off a slab o' bread, with butter and 'lasses. Golly! don't this coon like 'lasses, though!"

The young lady who was thus abruptly addressed looked down in surprise at the speaker, while her opened fingers let fall the flowers she had been clipping.

It was a ragged young vagrant, with a bunch of hair like a scalp-lock standing upright through his torn cap, while his coat was ripped as if he had been through a flax-mill. Yet there was something in the boy's face that took the earnest attention of the young lady. It was a look of honesty, pride and self-possession, with a keenness in the gray eyes that told of boldness and daring. And there was not wanting that look of cunning which comes upon the countenance of boys who have to fight their own way through the fox-covers of life.

It was a garden in which they stood, adorned with rich flower-beds. The lady, a tall, slender, handsome girl, of some twenty years of age, and with a face whose brightness was tinged with a shade of sadness, had been gathering a bouquet of the more delicate flowers, when she was thus abruptly accosted.

"Hungry, are you?" she asked, with a quizzical look. "A hungry boy might be satisfied with dry bread, without all the extras."

"Never git hungry *that* way," answered the unabashed boy. "'Tain't that way I were brought up. I'm a compound o' puddin' and 'lasses. Wasn't weaned on none o' yer tramp grub. If 'lasses ain't handy you kin toss in a dab o' strawberry 'serves, or some other sort o' sweet truck. I ain't a bit sassy."

"Why, no. You seem the very pink of modesty," she answered, with a laugh at the boy's comical countenance. "But will you please say how you came into this garden? Do you know that this is private property, with no admission for vagrants or beggars?"

"Mought be," he answered, indifferently. "That don't mean *me*! I ain't nary vagrant nor beggar, now you bet! I come in over the fence, 'cause I see'd a pretty lady pickin' flowers. Don't mind me takin' a rosebud, I s'pose. That's all I'm arter."

There was something odd in the boy's expression, which she could not quite make out. It looked like wounded pride.

"I thought you were hungry a minute ago."

"Got over that. You cured me, Jolly Joe

—that's what the boys call me—ain't nary beggar. Cain't go that sort o' sass on my grub. Mayn't I freeze onto a flower and git? Like roses 'most as much as I do 'lasses."

The boy drew up his well-formed figure, while a flush came into his gray eyes, as he stood like a tattered young soldier before the lady, whose looks betrayed a growing interest in him. Despite his pride there was a pinched look in his face which she could not help observing.

Yet she pointed to the flowers she had dropped, without a word. The boy stooped, picked up the meanest of them all, and stuck it defiantly in his button-hole.

"Guess that's gay enough fur a beggar. Much 'bliged!"

He turned abruptly awsy. A slight stagger, as of weakness, marked his step. Her eyes filled with a softer light.

"Stop!" she commanded.

The proud youngster walked on as if he had not heard her.

"Will you not pick up the rest of my flowers for me?" she gently asked. "You made me drop them."

"Course I will! I'd pick up a stable full if you put it that way. Ther' ain't no chap goin' kin say as Jolly Joe's a shirk."

In an instant he was on his knees, gathering the scattered flowers, which he arranged with a skill which she did not look for at his hands.

"How long since you had anything to eat, Joe?" she softly queried.

"Dunno. 'Bout three days, I guess. Here's yer flowers, ma'am. Good-by."

"Won't you do something else for me, Joe?"

"Sartain. Jist pelt it out."

"Come this way then."

She walked toward the stately mansion which stood just in front of where this conversation had taken place. The boy followed, with a dubious look, as if rather doubtful about the new task that was laid out for him.

In a moment they had entered the kitchen of the house. Here she left him, after telling him to wait for a while. He was much better used to kicks than dimes, and feared that he might have been brought here to be cowhided for his impudent intrusion.

"I bet I git my teeth in the feller that tries it on," he savagely muttered.

"You can try your teeth in this," came a soft voice at his elbow.

Joe hastily swung round on his chair. There stood the young lady with a plate well heaped with bread and meat. And the bread was not only buttered, but was spread thick with some juicy preserves.

"That's what I want you to do for me. I want you to eat that."

The famished little fellow looked up into her face, and then at the food. A sort of gulping sound came into his throat, and he wiped his tattered sleeve hastily across his eyes. Yet his proud look did not abate one jot.

"You ain't in airnest?"

"In solid earnest."

"And I kin do somethin' to pay fur the grub?"

"Yes, I will find some task for you."

"Then here's a go, like a cow in a clover-

patch. Why, just now I'd sooner have that plate o' grub than a gold mine!"

The boy ate with ravenous haste. He had certainly been very hungry. She sat looking at him, pleased with the pleasure she was giving.

"You bet that's prime!" he declared, licking his lips. "It's jist gorgeous! Them there 'serves hits me in a soft spot, Miss— 'Tain't imperdent to ax yer name?"

"You can call me Miss Maud."

"Well, Miss Maud, you got plenty o' that sweet truck around?"

"I fancy so," she smiled.

"Guess I'll come and see you of'n. Now, what's the job? I'm jist as strong as a young hoss. Pelt out what I'm to do."

"Sit still, Joe; I want to talk with you. I see that you are not afraid of work. How comes it, then, that an active young fellow like you, in a large city like this, has been left to go without food till he is nearly starved? I should fancy you could easily earn enough to eat."

"'Tain't allers so easy, Miss Maud," answered Joe, in the tone of an experienced hand. "I've had a streak o' hard luck; that's 'bout the shape of it. Things is been goin' criss-cross with me, the wu'st kind."

"How so?"

"Tried a good many things. Had a peanut-stand, and it got keeled over by a runaway butcher's cart; broke everything to flinders, and bu'sted my bizness right up. Then I tried bootblack; but that line's played out; had to guv it up."

"Why? Has everybody taken to blacking his own boots?"

"Ther's a good many o' that mean sort. But the dirty Italian bootblacks is the worst. Ther's a reg'lar batch o' them nasty furriners on the street, that no sound American won't 'sociate with. That's what settled this coon. I went inter bankruptcy and guv up the bizness."

"What did you try next, Joe?" she asked, with a smile.

"Jumped inter the newspaper bizness next," he answered, dryly. "Jist as bad as the rest. Soon as I tried it on folks quit murderin' one another. And there weren't no wars nor prize-fights; and Congress adjourned, and stocks got steady. Everything tuk a dead set ag'in' me. Nobody wanted no papers, 'cause there wasn't nothin' in 'em. And finerly an ugly thief stole my funds, and the editors wouldn't trust me fur papers, so I had to slide out o' that line o' trade."

"Why, Joe, you seem to have had a hard time of it. But you are a spry little fellow that ought to get along. Your clothes don't cost you much; and you are not big enough to need much food."

"I kin stow away more provisions nor you think," answered Joe, proudly. "I'm a reg'lar little hoss at grub. Anyway, that's 'bout the whole story. Everything I tried lately is bin a dead failure. I ain't hit a job fur a week, and I ain't eat nothin' much. Folks yell, 'Git out, you dirty tramp!' Or they fling somethin' at me like a bone at a dog. I can't swaller beggar's grub—now that's jist the solid fact, Miss Maud."

"Good, my boy! I honor your spirit. But have you no one to care for you? Where are your father and mother?"

"Never had none."

"Never had any?"

"None as I ever knowed on, anyhow. Been kicked about like a tin can in a gutter, ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Jist like a mouse without a hole."

"Is there no one to look after you? No relations?"

"Nobody. Never had father or mother, or uncle, or aunt, or cousin, or granddaddy, nor nothin' o' that sort. Hoed my own road, right through. Nobody ever washed my face or combed my hair, or snuggled me in bed. Slept with dogs and hosses more nor I have with humans."

Maud's soft eyes were full of pity, as she sat looking at the friendless waif. Yet there was nothing in Joe's countenance to call for pity. His lunch had spruced him up again, and he looked as spry and wide-awake as a meadow-lark.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Can't say eggzactly. Somewhere 'bout fourteen, I s'pose."

"Then it is time you were at some regular employment. You ought to be learning some trade or business."

"Kinder o' that notior myself, Miss Maud. I'd work like a hoss if anybody'd take me on. But soon as they see me, that settles it. One look's enough to cook my hash."

She leaned back in her chair, looking at him with a musing expression. Joe sat upright, with square shoulders and a steady face, like a cavalry man on inspection. It was an odd scene, that *tete-a-tete* of the richly-dressed young lady and the ragged vagrant, who were conversing as naturally as if they had been in the same rank of society.

Their interview was interrupted by the entrance upon the scene of a portly gentleman, with a full, florid face. Joe glanced at him and shut his teeth. The young philosopher had evidently seen something not quite to his taste.

"Why, Maud, what are you doing here? I have been looking for you through the house. And what sort of companion is this? Where did you pick up this vagabond?"

His tone was full of displeasure, as he fixed his eyes angrily on the boy, who bore his gaze without flinching.

"It is a hungry little fellow, whom I have been giving something to eat," she answered. "But he is no common beggar, uncle. The boy is willing to work, and I am sure would be capable and industrious. He is a strong little fellow, too. Can you not find him something to do in your store? I am sure he would do you good service."

Joe locked up with a flash of hope.

"He would, eh? The roving young rag-bag! I thought you had more wit, Maud. You are always making a fool of yourself about some ragamuffin. Send the boy away. Get out, you young tramp!"

"That's what I told you they all holler, Miss Maud," said Joe, as he sorrowfully gathered himself up. "'Tain't the boy as folks want nowa-

days—it's the clothes. I know I'm honest, and I ain't afeard o' work, if I don't stand for a tailor's shop 'vertisement!"

He walked slowly toward the door.

"Do give him a trial, uncle," pleaded Maud. "He will be a very nice-looking boy if he is well dressed. And I am sure he will do his best in your service."

"Now let me hear no more of that, girl. I know my business. And I know this sort of customers much better than you can. Away with you, boy! There has been enough of this. If you don't make haste I will set the dogs on you!"

"If you set a dog on me I'll bite a slice outer his ear, I bet you on that," answered Joe, savagely. "And don't you try it on me, old skinflint, or I mought snip a bit off the end o' your nose."

The gentleman rushed at him, with a face inflamed with rage. But he might as well have tried to catch a weasel. Joe sprung with one bound into the bushes, and was in an instant lost to sight in the thick growth of the garden.

CHAPTER II.

HOW JOE LOST HIS COAT.

SEVERAL weeks have passed since the date of our last chapter. Jolly Joe is alive and hearty yet, and looks quite able to fight his own way through the world. At the moment when we next encounter him he is seated on a fire-plug, on one of the main streets of the city, as dilapidated as ever, yet as happy as a king. Joe has certainly been in luck, for in one hand he holds a fat slice of pie, and in the other a noble sandwich, to which he alternately devotes himself. Between his bites he whistles, as gayly as a bluebird on a branch.

"Jist you bet that pie's prime," he said to himself, as he took another huge bite. "And them sandwiches ain't to be sneezed at, neither. Guess I didn't strike a gay run o' luck when I hit that last job. No, not much, nary time. But the feller as says I didn't, kin go down cellar."

He went on whistling and swinging his legs, as happy as if he owned the whole city. A clean gift of a million dollars just then would have been wasted on Joe. He had the sunshine and a hunk of pie. What more could any one ask?

"Don't want to be hoggish," continued Joe, "but wish I had a pint o' peanuts to top off. Jist to fill in the cracks."

There was a touch of human nature. Man is never content. Give him the whole United States, and he would at once begin to wish for Tinicum Island to top off.

The jolly boy had been observed, not quite without envy, by many of the well-dressed folks who were passing by, many of whom had forgotten how to be happy, in the rush of money-making. One of these finally stopped before the boy, and looked at him with a harsh and sour expression of countenance.

"What are you doing here, you dirty young vagabond?" he sternly demanded. "Scoot now, before I hand you over to a policeman."

"What fur?" asked Joe, innocently. "You

don't own this street, do you, mister? Guess I pay my taxes, and I've got a right to all out o' doors. S'pose you slide on, 'fore I call a peeler. It's 'g'inst the law to 'sturb a gen'leman at his dinner. This fire-plug's as much mine as it's anybody's, and I'll freeze to it s'long as I've got a mind. Now you hear that?"

"You impudent young gutter-rat! Don't you know me? I've heard of your being begging at my house since I ordered you away. If you come there again I'll have you sent to the Poorhouse or the Refuge."

"Jerusalem! If it ain't old Skinflint, Miss Maud's nice uncle!" ejaculated Joe, with a whistle of surprise. "'Scuse me. I didn't reckernize you. Got so many 'quaintances that I can't carry 'em all in my top story. How-de-do, Skinny?"

"Why, you dirty vagrant!" cried the gentleman, swelling with rage. "You impudent little street rat! For a word more of that sort I'll shake you out of your skin, to teach you manners."

Joe sat as cool as ever on his perch, with no sign that he was a bit scared. He crammed the last mouthful of pie into his mouth, and chewed away busily, as if afraid he might lose it if things came to a climax.

"I'll tell you this," continued the gentleman, growing hotter than ever. "I won't stand impudence from boys and beggars, and I'm half-inclined to give you a lesson that you'll remember for a lifetime."

"Didn't guv you no imperdence," rejoined Joe pluckily. "It was you guv me imperdence. You begun it. Wasn't I settin' here, 'sturbing nobody, when you pegged in? I'm a nice little boy, as never gives imperdence to nobody. What you tell me to scoot fur? I ain't no scooter. And I don't keer fur nobody if he's big as a mounting. Won't let no rooster rub it into me, old hossfly, if he does wear a dandy coat."

"I'll shake you out of yours, you reprobate, for another word of your slack."

"You try it on if you want to wake up an earthquake. That coat's bought and paid fur. It's my rig, and if I like to wear it ventilated that's my biz. I know somethin' 'bout the law, mister. Don't you tear that there Chesterfield, or I'll fotch you afore Judge Parsons, with a habious corpius, quicker'n a cat's wink."

The enraged gentleman hustled up, hot with rage. Joe did not stir. He was pluck to the backbone. In a minute his angry opponent had caught him by the collar, and was shaking him furiously, tearing the ragged coat worse with every movement.

"I'll teach you, you rascal!" he hissed between his clinched teeth. "I'll teach you to come spying and stealing about my house! You insolent young vagabond!"

But there is such a thing as reaching for a fly and catching a hornet. With a quick squirm Joe slipped out of his coat, leavying the shabby garment in the hands of his assailant. Then with a downward plunge he rammed his head into the old fellow's stomach, doubling him up like a clasp-knife. The next instant Joe was out of his reach.

"You've stole my coat," he yelled. "Bet you

high I make you guv me a better one fur it. I ain't no slouch, old Red-eye. You can't climb this tree 'thout gittin' sour 'simmons. I'm goin' to call on Miss Maud, and I don't keer a shoe-peg fur all your dogs. That's me."

Away plunged the boy, leaving his coat as a prize in the hands of his assailant, who was groaning with the pain of Joe's hit "under the belt." The victorious young rogue disappeared around the corner with a yell of triumph. He was quite satisfied with the transaction. He had been well paid for his lost garment.

But we must leave him, and seek the residence of Mr. Wetmore, the gentleman in question, a few hours after the events just narrated.

This mansion was in the suburbs of the city. It was surrounded by a considerable tract of ground, forming a green lawn in front, and a garden in the rear, that in which Joe had made the acquaintance of his fair friend.

Maud was again in the garden, walking in a melancholy fashion up and down its rose-bordered alleys. Her face was filled with a shadow of trouble, with which was mingled a flash of spite.

"If I was only a man!" she said hotly to herself. "Or if I only had a friend worth a fig! I might as well be in a prison as here. I can do nothing. I see nobody whom I can trust. Yet I know there is something wrong. I know that I am being made the victim of roguery."

She tore the straw hat from her head, and flung it angrily away. Then she bent her hot forehead upon the cool crimson depths of a cluster of roses, clutching the stem until its thorns pierced her fingers.

"It is always so," she exclaimed as she looked at the blood-drops on her fair skin. "I can touch nothing but what I feel its thorns. Life isn't worth the living. My uncle is playing the rogue. I can feel it. Yet he has all my fortune in his hands, and I am powerless. It will be six months yet before I can demand it, and by that time it may all have gone to the dogs."

She continued her stroll up and down the alley, without noticing a stir in the leaves near her.

"He supplies me with money," she resumed. "With more than I need. But that may be a blind. I have heard and seen enough to distrust him. His partners cannot know the extent in which he is speculating with their business capital, or they would certainly not rest easy under it, I know. I have evidence of his rascality. But what can I do? I have no friend, no one who can observe my tricky uncle guardian, and show me how to check his villainy."

"Now, don't you swaller too much o' that provender. 'Cause you've got one friend, Miss Maud, that's solid clean through."

She started in surprise and alarm as these words met her ears. There, on the other side of the bushes, was a shaggy head and a freckled face, which she at once recognized.

"Don't git skeered," continued the voice. "It's on'y me, Jolly Joe Jorum. If you want my head for a football, jist say the word. I'll chop it square off."

He pushed through the bushes, and stood before her. It was Joe himself, though in his shirt-sleeves. He had lost his coat.

"What brings you here?" she demanded, sternly. "How dare you enter and haunt this garden, and play the spy on my private walk?"

"Heered you talkin', and wanted to take it in 'fore I showed myself," answered the unabashed boy. "Dunno how I'd know anything if it weren't fur listenin'. So, old Skinflint's playin' bluff with you, Miss Maud? Tryin' to rob you, and you ain't got nobody to put a spoke in his wheel?"

"It is none of your business, young impudence. Leave here, instantly! You had no right to come here, eavesdropping. I wish to never set eyes on your face again."

She was evidently very angry. Her face was flushed, and there was a flashing gleam in her eyes. Joe looked at her in surprise.

"All right if you say so, Miss Maud. But I never heered ther' was any harm in listenin'. Yer want a friend, and I'm yer hoss. Dunno how we could rig up a better team. I ain't quite a fool if I am a street rat. Why, I've jist had the awfulest scrimmage you ever see'd, with old Skinny. He shook me right outer my coat, Miss Maud. Blest if he didn't. But I sot up the stakes fur him. I guv him a rum go, now you bet."

"What do you mean, boy? Do I understand that you have had a fight with my uncle?"

"Yes. He guv me slack, and then I guv *him* slack. Then he said as my slack were impenitence. Then I told him he was a bossfly. Then he shook me like a terrier shakes a rat, and stoled my Chesterfield ulster. Then I put my head in his bread-basket, and made him wish he hadn't eat no dinner. Then I come here, 'cause he said he'd salivate me if I ever come here ag'in. That's how I come to hear you talkin'. Now, I'm bound to git even with Skinflint. He's got my coat, and I'm goin' to make him pay fur it, or bu'st. So pile out what's loose, Miss Maud, and you and me 'll go straight into partnership."

She stood looking down musingly on the youthful champion, while strange expressions passed over her face. Several minutes passed before she spoke. Then it was but to say:

"I suppose you are hungry, boy. You are here for your dinner, again."

"Dinner! Hope you don't think I'm a duck, that's allers eatin'. Why, I've eat enough grub to-day fur two boys o' my size. It's satisfaction I'm arter. Revenge!" And Joe did his best to make his voice deep and hollow.

She looked at him in silence for several minutes more, as if slowly trying to decide on some course of action.

"Come with me," she at length said.

She led on through the garden walk, Joe submissively following. In a few minutes she reached a summer-house that stood alone, overgrown with vines, in the rear end of the garden. This she entered, and seated herself wearily on its curved seat. Joe cur'led himself up on the floor and gazed into her face with the devoted look which a pet dog fixes upon its mistress.

"You may be able to help me," she began.

"I'm little and ragged, but I'm wide-awake, Miss Maud, and I'll take a new name and be Wide-Awake Joe to you. I'd sell my ears fur

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you. Pile it out. I hope it's ag'in' old Skinny, fur I don't love him, not much."

"Mr. Wetmore, Joe, is the proper name of the gentleman whom you christen by that irreverent title. He is my uncle and legal guardian. He has in his hands my fortune of a hundred thousand dollars. In six months from now I will be of age, when it becomes mine by law. But I fear it will be all gone. He is pursuing a course which I do not like. But I only suspect it. I want to be made sure of it."

Joe listened with an air of legal deliberation, as if he was a lawyer listening to his client. And the fellow had picked up some points in his rough tide of life. He was not wanting in wit and knowledge.

"Ain't he guv s'curity? I've heered as a guardian has to guv s'curity. And the s'curity is 'ponsible fur the plunder if he plays a sharp game."

"I fear his securities are good for nothing, my boy. There have been panics, and men have lost their money. I do not know, or I would act. My hands are tied."

"And you want me to spy out this caboodle? Ain't that it, Miss Maud? You want to git a sharp pair o' eyes on old Skinny, and salt his game fur him? Lawsee, that's jist my proventer! I like pie and strawberry jam, but I like satisfaction a mighty deal better. He owes me one, and I'm yer ribbins. Say the word and I'll go fur him like a hornet fur a bald-headed donkey."

"Can I trust you to hold your tongue, Joe? This must be kept private."

"You kin, Miss Maud. I kin talk the straightest streak out when I've got a clean swath. And I kin be as mum as a mouse in a cheese when I'm told ter."

Maud fell into a reverie, leaning her pretty face on her hand, and looking far away into the distance, while Joe gazed up at her like a worshiper at his idol. He was badly taken with his fair friend.

"You will want good clothes, Joe."

"Won't these do as I've got?"

"No. He must not know you. You must disguise yourself in respectability."

"I'll do it if you say so, Miss Maud. But I know I'll feel queer. 'Spectability ain't my strong holt, nary time."

"And you will need money. You will have no time to earn any. And you will have to make journeys."

"That'll feel queer, too. Never had much rattle in my pockets. But I guess I kin git used to that 'thout much diffikilt."

"Very well, Joe. We may have a hard battle before us. We must lay our plans for the campaign. If you win the fight for me you will not go without a reward."

For the next hour the two strange confederates were in busy consultation, after which Joe took his leave, with more money in his pocket than he had owned in all his life before.

CHAPTER III.

NEW COATS FOR OLD ONES.

"SEE here, Mr. Morewet. Told you I was comin'. I'm Joe Jorum, and I want a new coat."

"Wetmore, you son of a ship's cook!"

"I ain't. Wish I was. I'd had a better go on grub, if I had a ship's cook fer daddy. I never had no dad, and I want a new coat."

It was Jolly Joe, or Wide-Awake Joe, as he had rechristened himself, as ragged and disreputable as ever. He had plunged boldly into the wholesale grocery establishment of Wetmore, Brown & Co., and seated himself sturdily on a pile of coffee-bags, as he made this demand from the senior member of the firm.

"How dare you come here to annoy me, you rag-tag of a street vagrant? There is enough of this. I will pitch you head-first from a second-story window if you don't take away your ugly carcass instanter."

"Nary step till I git my coat. S'pose I don't twig the law, mister? Been to see a alderman, and he says as how I've got you foul. You stole my ulster. That's a case o' burglary, the alderman says, and I calkulate he knows. I want a new coat, and I'll snatch you lively if you don't plug down instanter."

"Why, you dirty jacknapes! Here, Tom, fling this sauce-pot, neck and heels out of doors!"

"Who is it, Mr. Wetmore?"

It was Mr. Brown who spoke, a gentlemanly, benevolent-faced person.

"An impudent varlet, who sauced me in the street yesterday. I shook him out of his rags, and he's come here with more of his sauce. Out with him, Tom."

Mr. Wetmore was very angry. His full face flushed purple, and only a sense of dignity made him keep his hands off the boy.

The man addressed, a burly porter, came bustling up, but Joe made no sign of moving. He was pluck to the backbone, and he had made up his mind it was to be a new coat or war in the camp.

"It was you sassed me," he declared. "When I wasn't sayin' beans to nobody, you come up and sassed me. And you stole my coat, and I want a new'un. And if you don't plank down, I'll snatch you up afore Judge Finnigin. I'll bet you he rakes you down."

Tom, the porter, by this time had come up. At a sign from his angry master he made a grab at the boy, but he might as well have tried to catch a flea. A quick backward somerset took Joe over the pile of coffee-bags, and in a minute he was standing on the top bag of the heap with his fingers at his nose.

"Missed it that time, Tommy! Cut and come ag'in, old snip-snap!"

The porter, angry at this defiance, made a rush at the boy. In an instant there was a hot chase, up and down, in and out, over barrels and bags, under tables and over counters, down into the basement, and up into the higher floors. A half dozen others joined in the pursuit, but Joe was as nimble as a weasel. A dozen times he slipped through their very fingers, and once made a flying leap over the porter's head from the top of a hogshead.

Finally he plunged down again to the first floor, and disappeared. His pursuers came tumbling down, hot and angry after him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Shot out the front door, I reckon," cried

Tom. "Blast his ugly pictur', I'd like to give him a shaking to learn him manners! Hang him fer a dirty little pilgarlic!"

"Too spry for you, Tom," said Mr. Brown, with a smile of amusement. "You can handle coffee-mats better than street rats."

"The rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Wetmore. "I'll give him his coat! I'll dust it well for him, the young scamp! Have you that manifest ready, George? I must be off to the custom-house."

"Here it is, sir," answered the clerk addressed, handing him a folded paper.

"Very well."

Mr. Wetmore seized his hat, crammed it angrily down upon his head, and stalked from the room, muttering savagely to himself as he did so. Jolly Joe had evidently greatly disturbed his composure.

An odd smile marked Mr. Brown's face as he turned away.

"It never pays to be too full of fight," he said to himself. "The boy does not look vicious. Perhaps Wetmore is himself most in fault. I never get into trouble with one of these boys. What can have become of the saucy fellow? I don't believe he left the store."

He had opened the door of the private office as he spoke. He stopped suddenly on the threshold, with a look of utter amazement. For there, in the cushioned arm-chair of the head of the firm, sat no less a personage than Joe Jorum, his hat pushed back, a pen behind his ear, and a newspaper in his hand, which he seemed to be diligently perusing.

"Hello!" cried the merchant, with more amusement than anger. "Why, you impudent varlet! How dare you come in here and take possession?"

"'Cause the cap'n's office's the best port in a storm. Them slow-shanked snooks was chasin' me, that's why. I want my coat, as old Skinny stole from me, an' I ain't a-goin' till I git it. I ain't none o' yer shirt-sleevers."

"Well, he has gone. So you can go. You will get no coat out of him."

"Then I'll salt him with the liveliest law-suit you ever see'd. I'm on'y a boy, mister, but I ain't been kicked round creation all these years 'thout larnin' a thing or two. See here, mister, you're Skinny's partner, hey?"

"My name is Mr. Brown, boy. And my partner's name is Mr. Wetmore. You are old enough to learn manners. Come now, I can do nothing for you. You must leave."

"Folks kin guv me what handle they please. I won't squirm," answered Joe. "Don't mind callin' you Mr. Brown, 'cause you're a gen'leman. But he's a sore-headed old skinflint, that's what he is. S'pose I don't know him? Guess I could guv you a p'int or two, if it were perlite. Mebbe you don't twig that he's sportin' half his time down on the coast, 'mong the puts and calls. Wonder what takes him there? Ain't puttin' and cillin' coffee and tea 'mong the brokers, are you?"

Joe's quick eye had noticed a slight start in Mr. Brown, and a just visible paleness of face. He closed the office door carefully and seated himself.

"Put down that paper," he said severely,

"and listen to me. You are not a fool, I can see that. You have roughed it in the world enough to know some things that many men twice your age don't know. Now what do you mean by this nonsense?"

"I mean biz," answered Joe boldly. "It's tales out o' school I s'pose, but that old sheninger stole my coat. Got my eyes 'bout me, Mr. Brown. I tell you old Skinny's goin' it heavy on the coast. See him down there every day. He's short on Erie, and long on Lake Shore. He dips heavy, now you bet! And if he don't come out some day with his feathers scorched, then I don't know beans from bullets."

"There, there, that will do. I want to hear no more of such nonsense." Yet Mr. Brown had grown visibly pale. "Here, boy, if we owe you a coat it is our duty to pay our debts. Take this." He opened the door of a wardrobe, and handed Joe a well-worn but sound coat, that looked but little too large for his stout frame. "And here is a hat, in the place of that apology which covers your head. Put them on and leave. And beware of the porter. He has a kick in store for you if he catches you."

"Him catch me? That snoozer? Not much, I reckon! Don't nab this weasel asleep, nary time. Much 'bliged, Mr. Brown. That's a gay fit. Tho boys won't know me, 'cause I's allers been wearin' ventilators. Good-by. If I git any other p'ints I'll post you on 'em."

Joe walked sturdily away, leaving Mr. Brown looking dubiously after him.

"Put a spoke in Skinny's wheel that time, you bet!" he said to himself. "Mr. Brown takes it quiet, but it hits him hard, I know."

Mr. Brown dropped again into his chair after Joe's departure, and leaned his head wearily upon his hand, while a doubtful look marked his intelligent face.

"I hardly know what to think," he said testily. "Can it be true as that boy says? Our finances have been trusted utterly to Wetmore. Can he be playing with our funds? Several times lately we have been in a tight scrape for cash, without any reason that I can see. If he is speculating with the money or credit of the firm it is high time it was known. By Jove, if it turns out to be true I will have a thing to say in it. I wish I had questioned the boy closer."

He snatched up his hat, put it on hastily, and walked with a quick step from the store, while a disturbed expression marked his open countenance.

Joe was watching from a nook on the other side of the street as the merchant came out. The boy's face lit up with a knowing smile.

"Brung him," he declared. "I knewed it. That's Miss Maud's fu'st shot. He's pluggin' fur the coast, if he ain't I'm a sinner!"

Joe walked with a dignified air down the street, very proud of his new coat and cap.

"That's a clean ten-spotter, as Miss Maud guv me to buy a new rig. Thought I'd see fu'st if I couldn't squeeze 'em outer old Skinny. Wish I'd axed fur pants and shoes and made a clear job of't. Got to buy them, I s'pose, fur my clothes is a good bit too vari'gated jist now. The portico don't 'gree with the ground floor."

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS MANSION.

A WEEK had passed since the date of our last chapter. It was night. Few people were abroad, for the hour was late, and the location one of the unfrequented streets of the city.

Down it walked two personages, one a portly gentleman who swung a gold-headed cane in his hand as he strode along; the other a youthful personage, who kept well in the gentleman's rear.

The gleam of a gas lamp showed the gentleman to be no less a personage than Mr. Wetmore. His eyes turned suspiciously to right and left as he passed on, as if he feared to be seen and recognized.

His follower was a neatly dressed boy, about as different in appearance from Jolly Joe as a garden rose is from a field nettle. Yet the light of the gas lamp showed that the face was the same. There was the same saucy countenance, despite the respectable rig.

"Lawsee, ain't I a spruce 'un!" thought Joe, as he looked down at himself with infinite satisfaction. "Been cuttin' the boys dead this week. They ain't fit to 'sociate with this 'spectable coon. Guess I'll strike out fur high-toned company, like old Skinny ahead. Wonder where the old snoozer is pilin' fur? Looks duberous, and I'm bound to trail him to his hole, if't takes all night."

For a week past Joe had been keeping up a sharp watch on the merchant. Of his first suspicion, which he had got from Maud, that Mr. Wetmore was heavily engaged in speculation, there was no evidence. During the week he had never once gone near the broker's offices, though stocks were just then very unsteady.

"Margins ain't the game," said Joe to himself. "Miss Maud's made a blunder. Ther's suthin' deeper nor stocks, and I'm bound to find it out or bu'st. Mebbe I don't know nothin', hossfly, but don't let nobody buy me fur a nobody, 'cause I'se been a little o' everywhere, and seen a little o' everything, if I am a spring chicken."

He continued his pursuit, keeping well behind his game, and hiding at every suspicious movement of the spotted gentleman in advance. At length Mr. Wetmore paused, turned, and took a keen survey of the surrounding scene. No one was visible. Joe just then was concealed behind a tree-box, through whose open slats he keenly watched his prey.

After this hasty survey Mr. Wetmore turned to the house before which he stood, quickly opened its door, and disappeared within its portal.

He had hardly vanished when the keen little spy was in front of the mansion, which he observed with an experienced eye. Yet there was nothing doubtful in its aspect. It was, as Joe felt himself to be, highly respectable. The house was a square-built, three-storied edifice, with brown-stone front, and a plain but stylish appearance. It stood separate from the remainder of the block, being bordered on each side by a space of ground, kept as a green lawn. An iron railing separated this space from the street. The house was dark in front. Its lower shut-

ters were closed, and no ray of light came from the upper rooms.

Joe looked at it curiously. He then crossed the street and looked at it again. Then he looked through the railing toward the rear portions of the building. From the windows of this region a faint light escaped, though they seemed closed by tightly drawn curtains.

Joe took a seat on the most convenient curbstone, took off his hat and scratched his head with a deeply reflective air.

"Looks as square as a bird-cage, with brass railin' and a singin' canary," he imagined. "Perfectly 'spectable. Mought some o' yer bank presidents, or yer hifalutin' tol-de-lol tony folks, live there. Mebbe old Skinny on'y callin' on some o' his big-bug 'quaintances. But what made him act 'sif he were 'shamed on't. That's the dig as gits me. Folks ginerally like to be see'd when they call on high-toners. They don't scoot 'long like they'd jist stole a leg o' mutton."

His soliloquy was brought to an end by the approach of a second personage. This was a flashily-dressed young man, who came up with a sprightly air, turned briskly into the house, and sharply pulled the bell. The door was quickly opened to admit him, and as quickly shut behind him.

Joe, from his station on the opposite curbstone, observed this, and scratched his head again.

"'Nother 'hap as wants to see the bank president," he remarked. "But he rings the bell. Don't carry a latch-key like old Skinny."

He continued his solitary vigil. During the next hour not less than a dozen men had come up and entered the house. These were in great variety, some young and spruce, some middle-aged, substantial folks. Some walked briskly, others approached cautiously, as if not caring to be seen.

"Queerest go I ever heered tell on," considered Joe. "Here's all sorts, shapes, and sizes. Some's 'shamed o' themselves and some ain't. Some's tony, and some ain't. That last chap was as rough as a nutmeg-grater. That's a high old party. Mebbe it's a Fenian meetin' hatchin' plans to blow up England, and tow Ireland over to the Yankee nation. Guv it up. Couldn't never guess conundrums. But there's on'y one p'int that's cur'us. Old Skinny goes in with his own key, but everybody else's got to ring the bell. He's mighty at home, he is."

Another person came up and was admitted. This was a young chap, dressed like a dude, and very foppish in manner.

"Ther' ain't nobody kicked out," queried Joe. "Guess I mought as well peg in, too. Ain't got no invertation, but I's got a hard face, and that's a ticket fur anywhere."

No sooner said than done. The impulsive boy hastily crossed the street, mounted the steps of the mansion, and gave a strong pull at the bell.

Instantly the door opened. Before him was a broad hall, into which he boldly stepped. The door closed quickly behind him.

Joe looked around for the person who had thus opened and shut the door, but no one was visible. He stood alone in a handsome vestibule, which was closed by a second door, further on.

To his ardent fancy the whole affair seemed the work of magic, and he felt as if he had suddenly become a prisoner, in some sort of enchanted castle.

There was nothing for it but to go on. He was in for it now. He tried the handle of the door before him, but it refused to yield. Then he gave it a sharp, bold knock. It still remained closed. Joe was not easily rebuffed. A loud rat-tat followed. But the house might have been utterly empty for any answer he got to his summons.

"Wonder if the'r' all asleep or dead; or if a chap's got to have some password to git in? Mebbe the outside o' this crib's the most comfor'ble."

"Come, youngster, what's the matter?" asked a sharp voice behind him.

Joe swung swiftly round. There stood a burly, fierce-looking fellow, dressed in a sort of livery, but apparently selected more for his muscle than his manners. How he had got there the startled boy did not perceive. He had not noticed a close-fitting side door, that was of the same pattern as the wall of the vestibule.

"Stir up, little 'un; what do you want, hey?"

"Don't Mr. Thompson live here?" asked Joe, at a loss for an excuse.

"No, Mr. Thompson don't live here," was the short answer.

"Or, Mr. Jones?" tried the boy, at a venture.

"No

"Or, Mr. Sunflower?"

"Are you poking fun at me, midget? Try it on, and I'll smash you!"

"Who does live here, then? It's somebody I want to see, but I've forgot the name."

"Then go home and fetch around a Directory, Here now. Get!"

He threw open the front door, and glared at Joe threateningly. The boy hesitated. He had made a dead failure, but did not quite like to give it up so.

"Got it now," he cried, with a show of briskness. "Don't Mr. Wetmore live here?"

The doorkeeper, who was standing by the door, fell back a pace at this name, while a momentary look of dismay came upon his stolid face. But he recovered in an instant, and advanced threateningly toward Joe, as if with intent to hurl him in a heap into the street.

"Hit you that time, flunky!" cried the saucy fellow, with a laugh of triumph, as he darted under the man's outstretched arm, and into the street. "Fotched you 'tween wind and water, old stiffy. Jist tell yer lord as I called to see him. Jolly Joe Jorum, he'll reckernize the name."

"Flirt now, you rascallion. If I catch you sporting round here I'll mash you up in a coffee-mill. Make yourself scarce, while your bones are whole."

He closed the door violently, shutting Joe out into the street. The latter crossed again, and took his former seat on the curbstone.

"Much I'll flirt! Didn't make much out that there little speculation, but I got one p'int. There's suthin' here as Skinny's 'shamed of. Don't want folks to know as he's in it. Now I'm goin' to know, or I'm goin' to bu'st. This is

my curbstone. I've paid taxes fur my sheer o' the street, and this curbstone's my sheer."

An hour more passed, while Joe kept up his lonely vigil. During that period no more persons entered the mansion, but several left it. But they came out as they had entered, one by one. There seemed very little good fellowship in the visitors to that stately edifice.

Joe grew more and more puzzled. Much as he was used to the ways of life in the city, he could make nothing definite out of this. The affair grew more and more mysterious the longer it lasted.

Finally there came out a young man whom he had particularly noticed on his entrance. He wore a slouched hat, and long hair and beard. There was about him something of a western aspect, visible alike in his face and his clothes. But the bold briskness with which he had entered the mansion was exchanged now for quite another manner.

He plunged out fiercely, while the light of a neighboring lamp showed that his face was deathly pale, and had in it the sharp-drawn lines of despair. He rushed blindly forward, as if utterly unable to control his movements. After a minute he checked himself, clapped both hands to his head, and reeled against the lamp-post.

"He's been hit hard," considered Joe. "Rank p'isen, I reckon. Never see'd a man so obfuscated."

A fierce oath now came from the young man's lips.

"Lost! Ruined!" he groaned. "There's only one thing left!"

He straightened himself up, plunged his right hand into his pocket, and quickly withdrew it, holding a pistol.

"A trigger touch cures all."

The pistol was at his head, his finger on the trigger. A moment more and the rash man would be stretched in death on the hard pavement.

But at this instant his hand was dashed hastily aside, and the pistol exploded harmlessly in the air. Ere he could repeat his mad movement the deadly weapon was snatched from his hand.

"Guess I'll take keer o' this little plaything. Don't b'lieve you're fit to be trusted with it," came a youthful voice at his ear.

It was Jolly Joe that had saved his life.

"Give me the weapon! I am ruined! Disgraced! Give it to me, or by Heaven—"

"Drop that, sonny," rejoined the resolute boy. "Come wi' me, afore that shot fotches up any peelers. If you want to shoot anybody don't shoot yerself. Shoot the chap as is been saltin' you."

"By Jove, it's a good thought, boy. I will, by Heavens!"

"Come with me fu'st, and cool yer porridge." Joe led the way down the street, followed submissively by the despairing young man.

CHAPTER V.

DOUBLING ON THE TEN.

"JIST look at me, mister. I'm on'y a boy. Dunno how old I am, 'cause my daddy never put my age in the Bible. 'Spect I never had no

dad, nor no Bible. But you kin bet yer head that what this coon don't know ain't wu'th knowin'. Had my eye-teeth cut afore I was weaned, and was brung up on pap and jography. Now pelt in and let's hear what's afloat."

This boasting speech came from Jolly Joe. He had led the despairing stranger to a distance from the scene of the last chapter, and they were now seated together on the marble steps of a quiet mansion.

The stranger looked keenly into Joe's face. He saw there a freckled countenance, marked with abundant wit and shrewdness, and with eyes that were full of keenness and rollicking humor.

"You're a sharp-looking young customer. Think you know a thing or two?"

"If I don't know a thing or three, ther' ain't no snakes!" rejoined the confident boy.

The stranger hesitated a moment. He had somewhat recovered his composure, and presented a handsome countenance, with something of the dare-devil humor of frontier life.

"Well, then, what do you want to know?"

"Fu'st, I want to know who I'm talkin' to. I'm Jolly Joe Jorum; what's your handle?"

"Jack Bledsoe, folks call me."

"And what sort o' shanty were that you come out of jist now, lookin' as if you'd been chawed up by a grizzly? 'Tain't a herrin' factory, or a private powder-mill, I reckon."

Bledsoe looked keenly at the boy.

"Can I trust you?"

"Dunno; can't allers trust myself; but you kin try. Won't split, 'cept somebody drives a wedge in."

"I have no reason to keep the seeret, at any rate. I owe it no good-will. It's a private gambling establishment, my boy."

"Whew!"

Joe gave a long whistle of astonishment. The cat was out of the bag with a vengeance. He sprung up and danced a jig to work off his excitement.

"And they roped you in and done for you?" he asked, on recovering his breath.

"I am ruined!" exclaimed Bledsoe, excitedly. "Cleaned out to the last penny. A clear five thousand gone into the maw of those hell-hounds! Why did you stop me? Why did you not let me shoot myself for a blind fool and idiot?"

"'Cause if all the idiots was to shoot the'r-selves, ther'd be mighty few folks left," answered the cool boy. "'S'pose I'd go under myself, 'mong the rest o' the fools. See here, Mr. Bledsoe, why don't you plug back and rake 'em out? Your luck mought turn."

"Very true; but I have no money."

"I have."

"You?" Bledsoe looked down on the boy with the gleaming eyes of the gambler. "How much have you got?"

"Ain't quite a millionaire, but mought rake up a ten-spotter."

"And you'll lend it to me for a last pool?"

"Dunno 'bout that. That 'pends. Want to know a thing or two fu'st. Who runs that shanty?"

"It's a sort of company concern, I fancy. It's their game to get on the track of strangers

to the city, rake them in, and sweep their pockets. That's the way they served me, fool that I was!"

"Isn't there a chap called Wetmore 'mong 'em? A stout, red-faced rhinoceros, as set-up as if he'd jist swallowed a mahogany fence-post? Dressed like a undertaker, and as solemn as a funeral sermon."

"Didn't see any such chap," answered Bledsoe, with an involuntary smile at Joe's odd description.

"He's there, anyhow. See'd him go in. When I twig a coon once I've got him. That's the chap I'm arter. See here, Mr. Bledsoe, can't you ring me into that shanty? I's got bizness there, the wu'st kind. You kin have my ten, if you'll let me tell you how to play. I've got scrunchin' luck. Been 'round some, and know a thing or two."

Bledsoe looked at him doubtfully.

"I am afraid a boy of your size cannot get past the doorkeeper."

"Feard not myself. Had a confab with that corn-cracker, and told him suthin' 'bout his pedigree. He got mad, and I got out."

"There is one way it might be done," said Bledsoe musingly. "Can you climb the railing and slip round to the side door of the house? There is a signal-knock that lets visitors past the doorkeeper. Then we go back along the passage. I might slip open the side door, and let you in."

"It's a bargain," exclaimed Joe. "I'm a reg'lar squirrel at climbin' railin's. Come ahead, while the game's alive. I know old Skinny's there, and I'm bound to twig him."

This conspiracy was at once put into execution, Joe full of enthusiasm at the prospect of carrying out his scheme, Bledsoe with the wild hope of the inveterate gambler.

The hour was now growing late. The night was dark. Nobody observed the adventurous boy, as he climbed like a cat up the railing, and sprung down to the green grass of the lawn within.

He hurried on past the main building, and to the side door to which he had been directed. All here was in shadow. But from the room above, in the second story of the main building, a faint light made its way through the clinks of the closed curtains, and an occasional vague sound could be heard.

Joe waited impatiently, while the minutes slowly passed, in dread lest the scheme of his new friend might not work. At length, much to his relief, he heard a slight creaking sound at the door. In a minute it opened a narrow crack, and a cautious voice asked:

"Are you there? Come, quick."

In an instant the nimble lad had slipped through, and the portal was silently closed behind him.

"On, this way," whispered Bledsoe. "Fork over that ten."

"You'll play jist as I tell you?" demanded Joe.

"Yes. My luck isn't worth shucks. I'll try yours."

Their way led up a flight of stairs, and to a door on the second floor. At this Bledsoe again

gave a peculiar knock, when the door was instantly opened.

Before them appeared a large, well-lighted room, containing a considerable number of men, the most of whom seemed engaged in some card or other gambling game, of which several varieties were in active operation about the room. Bledsoe stepped in, closely followed by his youthful companion.

Their further entrance was checked by the doorkeeper.

"This is decidedly against the rules," he declared. "No boy can be admitted. You should know that, sir. The boy must go out."

"I know that I've been cleaned out. I've come back here for another buck at the tiger. This boy is my banker. He will and shall go in."

"Sorry, sir. But it can't be done."

"Like ter know what's the reason?" demanded Joe, insolently. "S'pose I'm a soft-head, old boozy? S'pose I ain't been round? Jist you bet I know everything that's w'u'th knowin' 'bout these diggin's! I can't steal no new p'ints out your old caboose."

This controversy had attracted the attention of many of the players. Joe's loud tones in particular had disturbed the serenity of the gathering. A portly personage hurried forward from the rear of the room. He was dressed in a light plaid suit, with a loud necktie and all the appearance of a sporting character. He wore a long, thick mustache, and his face had something of a pallid aspect.

"Hey!" he ejaculated. "What's all this? Who let that boy in? Put him out instantly, and the man that introduced him."

"I don't think you will," said Bledsoe, setting his shoulder sturdily against the doorsill. "I left my purse here an hour ago. I've come back for it."

"I don't care a fig for that. You can stay if you want, but the boy must go."

"Are you the boss of this 'stablishment?" asked Joe.

"I am the proprietor."

"That's jist all I want to know," answered the boy, with a meaning wink. "And if you know which side yer bread's buttered you'll haul in your horns. Mebbe you don't reckernize me. I'm Jolly Joe, I am. You can't pull the wool over my eyes, old Skinny. S'pose I don't twig you in that new git up, hey? So, you're the boss! Glad to hear it. That's what I came here to find out. Oh, won't I make Rome howl 'bout your ears! Kick me out, boozy. I want the wu'st way to be kicked out."

The face of the proprietor grew suddenly pallid, while a very disturbed look marked his features. Joe was right. It was Mr. Wetmore in disguise. The keen boy had his foe decidedly by the ears.

This look of dismay was replaced by one of cunning, and by a forced smile.

"Where did you pick up this little idiot?" he asked Bledsoe. "No matter. It isn't worth while raising a disturbance. Let him stay, now that he is in. I hope you will go on with your play, gentlemen. I will take measures in future against any such intrusion."

"Shet the stable door arter the hoss is stole, I

s'pose," muttered Joe. "Thought I'd make you blow another tune. Come ahead, Mr. Bledsoe. We've got the bull by the horns."

The Westerner led the way to the faro table, followed by his youthful companion. The disguised proprietor had withdrawn to another part of the room, where he seated himself, and commenced diligently to gnaw his nails, while his eyes were fixed with a dark and lowering look upon the daring boy. Joe had got into the lion's den. Would he get out again as easily? That was another question.

There were several persons around the faro table. Bledsoe changed his ten-dollar bill for a check of the same value.

"Going to put all my eggs into one basket. Is that right, Joe? I'm to play your game, you know."

"Correck."

A game was played and Jack Bledsoe was the winner.

Thrusting the money carelessly into his pocket, he strode away from the table, followed by Joe, who gave a wink full of impudent triumph to his disguised foe as he turned away.

Wetmore paid no attention to this insolence. He seemed to be biding his time. Joe was not yet out of the lion's den.

The remaining players followed the odd couple with curious glances as they swaggered out of the room. The door was closed sharply behind them as they passed out to the stairs. A sardonic smile curled Wetmore's lips. He evidently had a game in reserve.

Down the stairs they went, and along the passage toward the street. The door was opened before them. Bledsoe passed on to the vestibule. Ere Joe could follow he was caught by a strong hand and jerked fiercely back, the door sharply closing.

Bledsoe turned angrily back. But he was caught by a brace of strong arms, and thrust violently toward the street. He knocked down one of his assailants, and made a vigorous effort to draw his pistol. Ere he could reach it, however, he was pushed over the threshold, and the door hastily shut in his face.

The game had been played. Joe was a prisoner in the hands of the Philistines. His friend was in the street, with a firmly locked oaken door which resisted his every effort to re-enter. The banker had won in the last deal.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEXT MORNING AFTER.

JACK BLEDSOE was not the man to turn traitor to the hand that had helped him. Nothing could be done that night; but at an early hour the next day he was back again to the gambling saloon, with an officer and a magistrate's warrant, determined to release the imprisoned boy if he had to bring all the power of the courts into requisition.

The mansion looked so utterly quiet on their approach, that it seemed as if a mouse could not be stirring within its walls. To the violent pull of the bell no answer was returned. After several hand-jerks, a man came round the corner of the house, watering-pot in hand.

"What do you want?" he asked. "The

family are not at home. They have been in the country these six weeks."

"That cat won't jump," answered Bledsoe, hotly. "We want entrance to this gambling hell. And we'll have it or split something."

"This what?"

"This gambling-hell."

"Are you out of your senses?" asked the man, with a show of astonishment. "I tell you none of the family is at home. Mr. Bradley is at his country-seat at Ardmore."

He turned to walk away, with the look of one who is being trifled with.

"Stop there, my friend," cried the officer, with authority. "You will refuse to open that door at your peril. I have here a search-warrant. We must go through that house, family or no family."

The servant turned again, with a flushed face. He read, through the railing, the paper that was presented to him.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "It is an outrage. The house is empty. I have been left in charge of it."

"It won't be empty when you let us in. Quick, now, or I will break open the door, and bring you before the magistrate for contempt."

With a shrug the servant turned away. In a few minutes the front door opened.

"Mr. Bradley shall know of this outrage," he said. "Come now. Here is the house. I will go with you, for I am responsible for its contents."

"Very well," said the officer. "We will not steal anything. Now, Mr. Bledsoe."

Bledsoe led the way confidently toward the gambling-room.

"We will show you a thing or two about this house," he said sarcastically to the servant. "You don't seem to know what sort of a shanty it is. And we will have that boy, or know the reason why."

He flung open the door of the gambling-room as he spoke, with a look of triumphant malice. But the face of the servant was all pure innocence and surprise.

"See here," exclaimed Bledsoe. "Hello! By Jove! What does this mean?"

He paused in utter astonishment. No trace of gambling apparatus was to be seen. The apartment was furnished like a quiet family sitting-room, with nothing to show that it had ever been used for any other purpose. Linen covers lay on the furniture, as if to protect them from dust during the absence of the residents.

The officer entered the room and looked dubiously about him.

"By hook and pie this was a gambling-saloon last night!" cried Bledsoe, excitedly. "It was full of gamblers. I played here myself. There were a dozen games going."

"Are you sure of the house? We know nothing of any such establishment here."

"Sure? You bet I am. The boy is here, I'll swear it! The hounds have got scared, and made tracks. But they snatched that boy, and I'm bound to have him out of their hands. The house must be searched."

The officer somewhat unwillingly obeyed. He was growing doubtful. From garret to

cellar every room was examined. All was quiet and respectable. The furniture remained as if the family had just left it. Joe was not there, that was certain. Nothing suspicious appeared.

"Well, what do you think now?" asked the servant, who had followed them closely round. "It doesn't look much like a gambling hell. I think Mr. Bradley will have something to say about this business."

"All right. Let him. Here is my card, which you can send him. By Heaven, officer, I am afraid some foul play has happened. I will not drop it here. I will have that boy out of their hands, if I must search the whole city."

"You will need better luck than you've had this time," answered the officer, with a cynical smile. "I am afraid you are on a very cold trail."

Bledsoe made no answer. He saw that he was looked on as a fraud or a fool. Yet there was something in the manner of the servant which convinced him that that individual was playing a game. He walked away from the house with downcast head and brooding brow. A neat trick had been played. Just how was not so sure. Yet he had no idea of deserting the friendless boy who had done him such a service. Jack Bledsoe was pluck to the backbone. He had followed an Indian trail more than once in his life, and had no idea of letting himself be thrown off the track by this blind.

But we must return to the adventures of the boy, who had been so neatly trapped, and who had so mysteriously disappeared.

On being drawn back from the door, Joe's natural impulse was to give vent to a yell of alarm. But a handkerchief was clapped over his mouth, from which came a peculiar sweet odor. He struggled in the hands of his captor, but he felt his senses rapidly leaving him. In a few seconds he fell back limp and motionless. He had been chloroformed.

Of what happened during the succeeding few hours Joe was utterly unaware. Once, indeed, he partly regained his senses, and felt, as in a dream, a racking motion and rumbling sound, as of a carriage driven rapidly over a stony street.

But the sweet-smelling handkerchief was again applied to his nostrils, and he sunk back into a deep insensibility.

When he again opened his eyes it was to see a gleam of sunshine pouring through a low window which opened before him. He lay on a narrow cot, in a small room with plain whitewashed walls and sparse furniture. For a while a sick feeling kept him motionless. Then this passed off, and his strength and spirits slowly came back to him.

He tried to rise, but in vain. He was bound to the cot by a rope that passed tightly round his waist, and was tied beneath the bed.

It was some time before Joe could get a clear recollection of the events of the preceding night. Point by point it came back to him, and he groaned with spite when he thought of how neatly he had been tricked.

"Old Skinny got his work in on me that time," muttered the young prisoner. "But if

he thinks he's took the starch outer this coon. I'll bet him a cow to a 'possum that he's mistook. I don't b'lieve he'll kill me. And I'm goin' to work fur Miss Maud while the sky keeps blue."

All seemed quiet about the house. Joe waited for several minutes. Not a sound came to his ears. He finally got tired of this, and yelled out to the top of his lungs:

"Whoopee! Wake up! Where'bouts is you all? Won't somebody pile in and take off this rope necktie? Want to dance a jig, and can't do it with this thing on. Whoopee!"

His continued yells were answered by a sound below. Then a man's head was thrust into the room and withdrawn. Voices were audible outside. Finally the door again opened, and a personage entered, whom he recognized at a glance. It was Mr. Wetmore, though still with his diguising mustache, and his flashy suit.

"So, boy," said the latter harshly. "You have dug your grave and tumbled in it. So you are going to blow on me, hey?"

"I won't swear as I won't, nor as I will," answered Joe, boldly. "You've tuk me foul, but you'll find me a hard orange to squeeze. I don't like you fur nothin', Mr. Skinny, and I ain't goin' to let on as I do."

"You have threatened me, boy. You have made a mistake. Suppose I choose to kill you, as I would a rat. You have no relatives or friends to look after you. You will be a wasp out of my way. What is to hinder me putting you under the ground?"

"Tain't a safe game," answered Joe, boldly. "There's sich things as ghosts o' dead men; and dead boys, too. And murder allers leaves its shadder behind. And I's got more friends nor you thinks on. Jist don't you try it."

"Will you swear, by all that's solemn, to never mention what you saw last night, and to forget that there is such a person as me in existence?"

"Nary time," answered Joe. "Don't 'prove of swearin. You can't tie this coon's hands by no sich spider-webs as that."

"Very well, then. . Your fate be on your own hands. You are playing with dynamite, boy."

He hastily left the room. Joe remained to his reflections, and not quite sure but that he had played the fool.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OPENING OF THE RAT-HOLE.

A WEEK passed away, during which Joe continued a close prisoner. The rope was removed, indeed, and he was given the freedom of the room, but it was with a firmly locked door, and a window that looked out upon a roof, full thirty feet from the ground. In the distance green fields, trees, and groves were visible. Not another house was in sight. The boy was evidently imprisoned in a country house.

The sight of those green fields was a delight to the street Arab, who had spent his whole life among walls, without a glimpse of the broad level of the country. He spent the weary hours of his imprisonment looking longingly from the window, and wishing he was only out among

the woods and waters which were visible in the distance.

"It's 'nough to guv a cove the blues," he ejaculated. "Wonder what old Skinny's up ter? Is he goin' to chop me up fur bologner sassagers, or is he goin' to say, git? I wish he'd do one or t'other mighty soon. Guess I'd sooner hev him do t'other. But he's a rippin' old honey, he is, and he mought take a notion to knock me cold. Bet you I haunt him if he does."

Joe threw himself testily on the floor. A faint murmur of voices came to his ears from below. He listened intently, but was unable to make out anything.

Yet a conversation was going on in a lower room in which the fate of the homeless boy was deeply involved. There were present the disguised merchant, Mr. Wetmore, and the burly fellow who had acted as doorkeeper of the gambling-saloon, and who now filled the office of jailer to the youthful prisoner.

"Dead men tell no tales," he said, with a surely frown.

"But murder leaves its shadow," answered Mr. Wetmore. "The boy said that, and he is right. I won't run the risk, for there's nothing to gain by it. All I need is to keep his tongue still for the next few months. He can tell what he will after that."

"I am not going to stay here for months, guarding a rat in a trap," growled the jailer.

"You'll be well paid for it. And there's many men would jump at the chance of a summer in the country."

"The country be fiddled. I ain't hankering after no such trick. But the pay's something. Make it enough and I'm agreeable. But how about the little game? Is it smelt out?"

"Not much," answered Wetmore with a laugh of triumph. "They don't catch this weasel asleep. Bledsoe was there the next day with a search-warrant, but I fancy he didn't find much. We flitted before morning, and left Jim behind to play the innocent. Set up again at the Liberty street shop. Everything is lovely, and a neater game than ever afloat."

A laugh passed between the two confederates, loud enough to reach the ears of the prisoner above. Yet there were other ears, nearer than those of the entrapped boy. A spy was lurking within easy earshot of the talkers, and taking in with greedy ears every word that was said.

They rose and strode away at the end of their conference, still talking over the subject of their business.

Hardly had they gone ere the door of a closet opened, in the room they had just left, and out strode Jack Bledsoe, with a grim smile on his face.

"Did it up neat that time," he said to himself. "But why the blazes didn't they keep up that interesting confab? There's some few points I'd like to be clear on. So it's a traveling shop he keeps. Flits to a new hole when the old one gets too warm. Guess I'll have to hunt him up in Liberty street and make a new break for a pile. But wouldn't he be wrothy if he knew that I had tracked him out to this den? Now for the boy. Where is he? Out of this he comes or I'll sell my hat."

He slipped from the room, and began a cau-

tious investigation of the premises into which he had so shrewdly made his way.

Voices could still be heard below. Several persons seemed to be talking. Jack felt that he had taken on no fool of a job. He was in a hornets' nest where he ran a fair risk of getting stung before he got safely out.

But he was the right bird for this game. He was an old trailer, understood thoroughly the art of hiding, and was never the man to get scared at the shadow of danger.

Night was not far distant. Jack had a double job to perform, to see, and to keep from being seen. He must learn all he could before dark, and trust to night for the rescue and escape.

Little dreaming of what was passing below, Joe trod his narrow den like a leopard in a cage. He tried again the narrow-paned window, as he had tried it fifty times before. But it was firmly fastened on the outside. And if he should get out he would still be thirty feet above the ground, a little too much for a comfortable jump.

He turned impatiently away, and resumed his uneasy stride.

It was growing dusky in the room, and shadowy outside, when the door at length opened, and the keeper appeared, bearing with him a platter of food.

"Here's your grub," he said, harshly. "Fall to, chapee, and make the most of it. You ain't worth the good victuals we are wasting on you."

"Then I wouldn't waste 'em, if I was you," rejoined Joe coolly. "Jist turn me adrift. Kick me out, if you want, and call me a dead-beat. I won't guv no slack back."

"S'pose not," answered the man with a grin. "But we can't spare you just now."

"Then jist stop yer everlastin' tongue racket, and git outer this parlor. Didn't 'vite you, as I knows on."

The keeper withdrew without answering.

"Bet you I make Rome howl when I do git out," continued Joe, as he addressed himself to his supper. "I've got a peg or two in Skinny's coffin."

The meal was plain but abundant, and Joe had a boy's appetite. In fact, he had been better fed in his prison than for a long while out of it. But the boy had been a free bird all his life, and would yet have preferred a bone in a gutter than a king's banquet in a prison cell. Liberty is sweeter than the best food that was ever cooked.

"Hillo there!" he cried, abruptly dropping the last morsel of his meal. "What's that?"

A tap on the window-pane had given him this start. He hurried forward. There was a face at the pane. With genuine delight he recognized the countenance of Jack Bledsoe.

Joe would have given vent to some dangerous exclamation, but for the cautioning sign from his friend. The latter motioned for him to raise the sash. Joe indicated in dumb show that it was fastened outside. In a minute Jack had found and removed the fastening, and the window was open.

"Hush!" cautioned the scout. "Not a loud word. I'm after you, Joe. Going to dig you out of this shanty."

"Bully fer you!" exclaimed the delighted boy.

"You kin snatch me out by the hair, if you want. I won't squeal."

"One moment. Will that chap be back after your empty dishes?"

"Yes. He allers comes back."

"Then we must play dumb. Don't let him see anything suspicious about you. Tap on the glass when he's gone."

The scout cautiously lowered the window, and replaced its fastening. Then he crept away from the dangerous spot. Joe looked out, but could see nothing of him.

"Like to be out there, I s'pose," spoke the voice of the keeper behind him.

Joe gave a guilty start. But he heedfully kept his face to the window.

"What's the matter? I didn't stick any pin in you."

"You mought as well, as come in a feller's room like a thief."

"What are you looking at? Got somebody outside?"

"The keeper walked up and looked out of the window. It gave Joe a surge of alarm, but he boldly kept his place and his countenance.

"You bet," he answered with forced coolness.

"Got a friend on the roof. Made up my mind not to stay no longer. Goin' to leave arter you carry out them plates. Good-by, boss. I'll guv you a recommendation fur jailer, to yer next place."

The fellow laughed.

"You're a cool little coon, by Josey! Kind of like you, boy, and won't slit your weasand except I get orders from headquarters. What the boss says has got to be done."

"Much 'bliged," answered Joe, carelessly. "Got any twin brothers jest like you? Like to trade off, if you have. Good-night. You won't find no provender left on their plates."

He stretched himself on the cot with a broad yawn, though secretly very anxious that the fellow should leave the window. It was not certain but that some trace of Jack's presence might be visible.

The jailer continued to stand there and look out. A new scheme came into the boy's shrewd brain. He sprung from the cot, and began a cautious movement toward the unlocked door.

"Hold there, cock of the walk! Can't spare you just yet."

Like a flash, the keeper was across the floor and had his back to the door.

"Thought you furgot to lock it," explained Joe.

"Did you? You're a very thoughtful young monkey. But if you'd gone out that door you might have come back with a bu'sted brain-pan!"

He gathered up the empty dishes, and went scowling from the room. A cunning smile came on Joe's countenance, as he heard the click of the key in the lock.

"Fooled that boozer, anyhow. If he on'y knowed! Lawsee, wouldn't ther' be war in the camp!"

He waited for several minutes to avoid any danger of a return. His ear was at the key-hole, but all seemed quiet below. With a grin of triumph he hurried across, and tapped lightly at the pane.

The signal had to be repeated several times before the welcome face of the scout appeared. He hastened to again open the window.

"I was afeard that cross-cut customer was here yet," he explained. "I twiggid his ugly snout, and slipped back. Wake up, Joe! Got any valuables you want to collect?"

"Only got one vallyble," answered Joe, with a shrug, "and that's what's inside my skin. Calkerlate I'm a jewel myself; but I ain't got no diamonds."

"Come, then!"

During this interval the night had deepened. It was quite dark outside, except for the faint glow in the west. Joe slipped joyfully through the open window, which was quickly closed and fastened by his shrewd friend.

"No use leaving our track open," he declared. "Follow me, boy, and hold on like a cat. The roof's steep and slippery."

That was a fact; but Joe was good at holding on, and he scrambled after his active friend until the ridge-pole was reached. Below them on the opposite slope appeared a dormer-window like that they had just left. A few seconds brought the active pair down to its level. Slipping round in front, Jack carefully inspected the room inside.

"The coast's clear," he muttered. "Follow me."

The sash was cautiously raised. In an instant he slipped through, and extended a hand to Joe. The latter sprung through the opening with the alertness of a cat.

"So far, so good. But the worst isn't past yet. Slip off your shoes, boy. We must move like mice."

Joe quickly obeyed. Jack had his already slung over his shoulder. He listened for several minutes at the door before venturing further.

"Come," he whispered. "Step carefully."

Along a short passage and to a flight of steps led their way. Be cautious as they would, the stairs creaked frightfully under foot. Halting at every step, they made their way slowly down.

The floor below was reached. Still the coast was clear. The head of another stairway appeared, leading down to the ground-floor.

They hesitated for a moment, listening acutely, and striving to pierce the growing darkness with their vision.

At this instant there came a single loud, fierce cry of alarm from above, and the sound of shuffling feet.

"The cat's out!" exclaimed Jack. "The bird's missed out of the cage. It's Dick or devil now!"

"Let go," cried Joe. "Guess we kin hoe our 'taters."

Down the stairs they went with quick bounds, while the outcry behind them grew louder and fiercer.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

IT was certainly time to say good-by, and go. The noise behind the fugitives increased. Steps could be heard running on the floor below. Down the stairs they went, with quick bounds.

"This way," exclaimed Jack. "The house-door lies hereaway."

They had reached the lower level, and were

hurrying across the hall below, when a door at the side was flung violently open, and a man rushed out before them.

"What's bu'sted?" he shouted.

"The boy's escaped! Stop him!" came from above.

"Ay! ay! I've got him foul!"

"Have you?"

These words came from Jack Bledsoe, whose fist fell like a sledge-hammer on the man's temple, hurling him in a heap to the floor.

The pursuer above was now at the head of the stairs. Other steps and voices could be heard.

"Quick!" cried Jack. "There's a nest of them."

"I'm yer hoss," exclaimed the alert boy. "Pelt on lively."

Springing over the prostrate man, in an instant they reached and opened the door, and sprung out to the high stone steps in front of the house.

Joe was darting forward, when his experienced comrade caught him by the collar and dragged him hastily back. Leaping off the step he crouched down in the gloom beside it, dragging Joe down with him.

"They know the ground better than we," he whispered. "They'll nab us if we run. Keep mum as a mouse."

"You bet, hoss-fly."

They had been none too soon. The next instant several men came plunging hastily through the open door, one of them carrying a lantern, whose light fortunately did not fall into the dark corner beside the step.

Mr. Wetmore was among them, without his coat, and his face inflamed with rage.

"You're a sweet jailer," he began fiercely.

"Oh, drop that!" interrupted the jailer. "Catch them now and curse them after. This way. They can't be far off. We know the ground. They don't. We'll fetch them."

He plunged forward, followed by the two others. Across the yard in front of the house, and into the road beyond. Then they separated, each taking a different direction.

In a minute more they had disappeared in the darkness, except where the lantern shed its dim gleam from the distance.

"When in doubt play a trump. That's the rule in whist, my boy," laughed Jack. "Come back into the house. It's the last place they'll think of till they've scoured the country. Tain't the first time I've played this neat dodge."

"You're a cool 'un," exclaimed Joe, looking with admiration at his companion. "I'd never thought on't. Why, when they was standin' over us there my heart swelled as big as a cabbage. Lawsee, wasn't old Skinny wrothy! Jist mad 'nough to b'ile me alive."

While these words passed they had risen and entered the deserted house. It was lit up here and there with lamps, and Jack made a hasty survey of the lower rooms.

"Might pick up some tit-bit," he said.

"Jolly, if they hain't got a supper-table set here!" exclaimed Joe, as he opened the door of a room. "Piled full of grub. And here I've gone and swallowed my rations, and didn't

leave a mite of appetite," he declared regretfully.

"Guess I can pick a bit, for I've had no supper," returned Jack. "But let's locate this room first."

He looked out of the windows to spy the lay of the land beyond. Then he began a survey of the room itself.

"Seems to me I've seen that bit of apparel before," he said, pointing to a coat that hung against the wall.

"It's old Skinny's," ejaculated Joe. "Twigged it at the faro bank that night."

"Guess I'll investigate, then. All's fair in war."

He carefully examined the pockets of the garment. Out of one of them he drew a thickly folded paper. This he thrust into his pocket without opening.

"What's in it will keep," he said; "but my appetite won't. They can't be back for fifteen minutes at the earliest. I can stow away a fair share of provender in that time."

He coolly drew up a chair and commenced his supper, while Joe looked regretfully on, very sorry that he had spoiled his appetite.

"Tell me all about this business," remarked Jack, as he continued to eat. "I've only got the tail end of it now. What put Wetmore down on you? What put you down on him? Why are you spotting him? Let it out."

Nothing loth, Joe hastily ran over the story of his late adventures, his interview with Miss Maud, her confidential revelation to him, and the events which had succeeded.

"And I tell you she's a bouncer!" cried Joe with admiration. "She's as pretty as a full blood rat-terrier, and that's the prettiest thing I know on. She's just stunnin', now, you bet; and not a bit o' stuck-up 'bout her. Why, she couldn't use a college sport kinder nor she did me, when I hadn't nothin' on but rags."

"In love with her, eh, Joe?" laughed Jack. "Didn't know you had such a softs pot. There, now, just slip across to the front window, and take a blink out. Look for that lantern. If you see a sign of it coming back, give me the cue."

Joe hastened to obey, while Jack coolly cut himself another morsel of steak, and spread a slice of bread thickly with rich country butter.

"I like to eat my meals in peace and comfort," he remarked. "But if our friends want to make a full supper, they'd best hurry back."

The youthful spy meanwhile had stationed himself at the front window, through which he took a long observation of the surrounding scene. It was now so dark that he could see but a few yards from the house. No sign of the lantern could be made out.

"They're arter us yit, I s'pose," he grinned. "Climbin' fences, and tumbling over roots and rocks. And growlin'. And cussin'. I bet old Skinny's cussin'. Lawsee, wouldn't he cuss if he twigged all that's goin' on here? Never heerd of sich a sell."

He broke into a fit of laughter that, for a minute or two, made him forget his business. When he looked out again it was to get a start. For there stood the man with the lantern. He

had just come round the corner of the house, and was gazing in the window at Joe with a very surprised expression of countenance. It would not have been easy to tell which was the most startled of the two.

But in a second the boy recovered his wits, and ran hastily back crying out:

"Slide's the word, Jack Bledsoe. Cut and run. They're arter us."

At the same moment the front door was flung open, and steps were heard in the passage.

Joe broke into the supper-room. Jack had already taken the alarm, and was on his feet and at the window, which he had taken the precaution to leave up.

"Quick, Joe! After me!" he shouted, as he cleared the sill with an alert leap and landed on the green lawn outside.

Joe ran around the table and across to the window. A chair stood in his way, which he flung hastily aside. He gained the window, leaped like a cat to the sill, in a doubled up attitude, ready for another leap outside.

But at the same instant, with a singing whiz, a short, heavy club whirled across the room, from the hand of a man at the doorway, and took the unlucky boy square on the back of the head, tumbling him like a log from the sill to the ground below. He fell dead as a stone, all his senses knocked out of him by the hard blow.

Jack by this time was thirty paces away. He heard the dead sound of the blow behind him, but did not dream what it was, as he ran swiftly on.

"Come, lad," he cried, deeming that Joe was close behind him. "Keep an eye on my top-knot, and run like blazes. If we can hit that piece of woods we are safe."

On he ran, jumping a fence before him like an athlete. Five minutes more at his rapid pace and the skirt of the woodland was gained. Now for the first time did he pause, and look behind him, surprised at the silence.

To his astonishment, no one was visible, neither the boy nor his pursuers. But it was impossible to make out anything at twenty paces. Lights were visible at the house, and glimpses of something moving, but what it was could not be distinguished.

"Joe," he cried cautiously. "Where are you, boy? Joe!" His voice grew louder. "Where are you lazing? Hey? This way, youngster!" His tones now rung out loud and sharp. "Hello! Stir your stumps."

No answer came. All remained deathly silent. A suspicion of the truth began to cross Jack's mind.

"By the great grizzly, I believe they've nabbed the lad, after all. It's too confounded bad if they have. A hasty supper and a scrap of paper don't pay for the risk I've taken."

He seated himself disconsolately on the trunk of a fallen tree, and waited developments, using his eyes and ears with intent scrutiny. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Nothing appeared, either to eyes or ears.

"They're not chasing me, that's a sure go," he muttered. "They've nabbed the boy, or I know nothing about woodcraft. There's nothing for it but to scout back and smell out the lay of the land."

With the caution of a trained scout he commenced a reverse movement toward the house which he had so lately left.

"Fool that I was," he muttered. "I trusted too much to luck and chance, and to a boy's eyesight. It wasn't the judgment of a scout. But I'll have the lad again, or know the reason why."

Ere long he had come near the house. His movements now grew more cautious. No one was visible. Everything was still. He neared the window from which he had leaped. It was closed, and the curtain drawn inside. A faint sound, as of voices, came to his ears.

He stooped down and felt the grass below, as if with the fancy that the boy might be lying there still. Some moisture wet his fingers."

"The dew is falling very early," he muttered. "Or is it dew? It feels clammy."

Taking a match from his pocket he struck it on the wall of the house, and examined his fingers by the fluttering light. They were red! It was blood, not dew, that had wet them!

And there, on the green grass, red spots were visible.

Jack stood aghast, gazing at his fingers in horror till the match went out.

"Dew!" he muttered. "It is the dew of murder! They have killed the boy, and I am responsible for his death!"

What was to be done? Should he seek aid? No. The boy might be only wounded. He must watch the house during the night. Something might happen in his favor.

The hours passed slowly by as he continued his long vigil, seated beneath a shed near the rear of the house. Yet no sound came to his alert ears. Everything was quiet. There was for a few minutes a movement of lights in the upper rooms. Then they too went out, and deep darkness fell over all.

Midnight came and passed. In spite of himself a doze fell upon the senses of the solitary watcher. He was but half asleep, yet his former vigilance was relaxed. And now, in his slumber, there came to him a sound as of carriage-wheels, and of low voices.

It was a minute before he could throw off his lethargy, and regain his senses. The sound of wheels was still faintly audible, in the distance, but he imagined it was but an echo of his dream. He heard no voices, and no signs of life were visible about the solitary house. He fell again into the doze from which he had but half-awakened.

Day dawned at last. With its first gleam in the east the patient watcher was on his feet, and cautiously observing the house. He made his way with heedful steps to the front. To his surprise the door stood wide open. No living thing was visible.

He boldly penetrated, stepping with noiseless care. His anxiety made him dare all danger. Room after room was entered and examined. No person was to be seen. He ventured up the stairs. The doors of the upper rooms stood open. They were empty. The house was utterly deserted. Not a sign of its late inhabitants was visible except that red witness on the grass, before which the scout again stood, with a feeling of deep horror in his brain.

CHAPTER IX.

COPPERING A BET.

"I'LL tell you this, Miss Weatherly, your uncle is a confounded fraud. Those are strong words to use to a lady, but they express my feelings."

It was Jack Bledsoe who spoke. He was seated in a richly-furnished apartment, in the presence of Maud Weatherly, whose beautiful face was fixed on him with eager excitement. But Jack was as cool as if he had been in a western stock-yard, or camping out on the prairie. One would have thought that he had been brought up to this kind of thing.

"I fear you are right, Mr. Bledsoe. But tell me what you mean. I am burning to know. I am deeply interested in his movements, for certain good reasons."

"I know. The boy told me all. I am sorry that I cannot speak at present, Miss Weatherly, but I have given a pledge. But you can trust your fortune in my hands. The man is a villain, and I am bound to unmask him."

"And the boy? Little ragged Joe?"

"In serious danger I fear. He saved my life. I will not forget him. If any harm comes to him it will go hard with the man that does it. I am not one of the kind that it is safe to play with."

The young lady's eyes beamed with admiration as she fixed them on the face of the good-looking and self-poised man before her. There was that in Jack's expression which made her content to trust her luck fully in his hands.

"Yet I hope you will run no dangerous risk, Mr. Bledsoe," she pleaded.

"Don't you break your sweet heart about that," said Jack, with a laugh that had a reckless ring. "We have risk for lunch and danger for supper out West. I'll pull through all right, never fear. But I must be away. You will remember our compact?"

"I shall not forget."

"Good-by, then. And trust me."

"I do, Mr. Bledsoe."

She held out her hand, which Jack clasped in a strong pressure. Her eyes were fixed on him with a peculiar softness that made the heart of the bold fellow beat like a trip-hammer in his breast. As he went along the street the memory of that look haunted him.

Jack had some important business in hand that day, which he proceeded to put through. Of this the most important was to hunt up a young gentleman whose acquaintance he had made during his gambling adventure. He fancied this person might know the locality of the Liberty street den, and be able to introduce him there. Jack had business in his mind's eye.

He was successful in both particulars. He found his friend, who proved to be well posted, and promised to introduce him that night to the Liberty street saloon.

"And I may ask you to back me," said Jack. "I've got a trifle of sport laid out."

"I am your man. I am down on those sharks as much as you can be."

Within the saloon in question, at midnight that night, an active game was in progress. It was a room much like that to which we have already introduced the reader, and was fur-

nished with the gambling implements which had been so hastily removed from the corner place.

Wetmore was present, now dressed in a suit of blue, with a flashy diamond pin, and a gold watch-chain that looked heavy enough to strangle an ox. He wore the heavy mustache as a disguise as before, and his usually red face had been given a pallid hue by some preparation. Only a keen eye for faces could have recognized in this sporting faro banker the quiet, sober merchant, whose soul seemed to be buried by day in his coffee-bags.

On his face, however, was an ill-concealed trace of anxiety, as if something had gone seriously wrong with him.

A score of players were present, many of them the same persons who had taken part in the game at the other den. Just as the hour of midnight struck, into the saloon walked Jack Bledsoe and his friend, the former wearing an expression of cool energy that meant business.

Wetmore, who was standing near the faro-table, started as they approached, while his eyes were fixed on Jack's face with a look of malignant hatred.

"Didn't expect to see me," said Jack, with a sarcastic smile. "But we had such a neat little game the other night, that I thought a second dose of the same medicine wouldn't hurt."

"There's the table, open to all with the cash to plank down," answered Wetmore.

"Suppose one hasn't the cash?"

"Then there's the door. We have no room here for beggars."

"Very good, Mr. Oliver—that's the name you sail under I believe—but I have something that may take the place of cash. Do you recognize this interesting document?"

He drew from an inner pocket a closely folded paper. A statement of its contents was written on the outside. This he held up before the eyes of the angry banker, whose spleen turned to instant consternation. He turned white as chalk, and fell back a pace. Then he sprung forward and made a hasty clutch at the document.

"Not so fast, my hearty," said Jack, quickly withdrawing it. "Can't spare it yet. Just wanted to give you a peep."

"Hand it over, or by Heaven I'll know why! The paper was stolen from me, gentlemen, by this rascally thief. Return it, I say, or by—"

"Save all that wind, Oliver. You may have soup for supper, and you'll need your breath to cool it."

"It is mine, I say, and have it I will, by good or bad!"

"You acknowledge it's yours? That's one good point. Shall I read it to these gentlemen, or tell them where and how I got it?"

The cowed yet furious banker glared round him for some of his backers, with a growing intention to make an assault on the cool Westerner, and take the paper from him by force.

"None of that, my lively sport," cried Jack, coolly, as he divined the intention. "I'll strike the chap that lays a hand on me. Come. I'll give you a chance. Suppose I bet this interesting document at faro. It's worth ten thousand to me."

"Good!" cried the banker, "I'll cover your bet. Ten thousand on the ace against that interesting paper." And he hastily counted out the heavy sum demanded from the contents of a well-filled pocketbook, and signaled the dealer to proceed.

"I copper the bet," said Jack, quietly.

To this the banker demurred, but finally yielded.

Jack Bledsoe's keen eyes watched the fingers of the dealer, as they slowly lifted card by card from the box, and laid them successively to the right and left.

All other play ended in the room. As the cards came slowly from the box, a dozen sharp eyes aided Jack's to detect a foul draw.

Soon an impulsive shout came from the circle of spectators. The ace had appeared, and fallen on the left-hand pile.

"Guess I'll rake down that little heap," said Jack, coolly, as he grasped the heap of banknotes, and thrust them, with the document, into an inner pocket.

"And, now," added Jack, "there is another way in which you may win the document. Step aside here. This is a private matter."

Wetmore followed him out of the throng of gamesters who were busily debating the event which had just happened with very serious doubts as to the honesty of the game.

The two men gained a nook where they could converse unheard.

"What have you done with that boy—Jolly Joe, as he calls himself?"

Wetmore gave a guilty start.

"I know nothing about the boy," he hastily answered.

"You lie! You hold him prisoner. He was wounded in your hands. He may be dead, for all I know. If he is, by all that's good, you shall answer for his murder!"

"It is false! He is not dead," was the hasty reply.

"So much the better for you, then. I want that boy. I will make an even trade of this document for his body—alive and well, mind you. If he is hurt, you know the consequences."

"Hang the young rat! I don't want him. Put the ten thousand you have just won to the paper and he is yours."

"Not much! That was fair plunder, and I intend to freeze to it. The paper for the boy. Say the word, and quick!"

Wetmore hesitated, and seemed lost in self-reflection for several minutes. There was a look of furtive cunning in his eyes.

"He is many miles from here," he at length replied. "Do you know the village of Grafton, in Ohio?"

"Yes."

"The boy is there, under care of my agent. He is safe and well. I will give you an order for his delivery in exchange for that document. I am trusting to your honor."

"You have my word. Jack Bledsoe never went back on it yet. Deal square with me, and I'll deal square with you. That's as good as if it was sworn."

"Come here to my desk. I will write the order and give you the necessary directions. I take your word of honor, Mr. Bledsoe."

"Fool!" he said to himself, as he led to the desk. "You have put your neck in the noose. Beware! If you fall into my plot, I'll pay your score, as I am a living man."

CHAPTER X.

A TOUGH JOB OF WORK.

JOLLY JOE was gradually becoming his old self again. He was not dead. He was not even seriously hurt. But he had lain insensible for a period whose length he knew not, and he had come to his senses with a racking pain in his head that made him for the time wish he had been killed outright.

He found himself, as before, in a locked room, though a very different one from that in which he had been formerly imprisoned. It contained much more furniture, the floor was carpeted, and there were some cheap pictures on the wall.

The room had but a single window, and this was closed outside by green blinds, which were immovable, and which permitted nothing to be seen but the sky overhead. They had evidently been firmly secured on the outside.

But Joe was too miserable to trouble himself about anything of this kind, or even to eat any of the food that was brought him. He lay groaning on his couch, heedless of where he was or of who was about him.

Two days slowly passed away. On the morning of the third he awoke feeling like a new-made boy. The hurt in his head was still painful, but he had got rid of that miserable feeling of sickness and depression, and was as spry in his limbs again as a young colt.

With this return of health came back all his old independence and love of liberty. He quickly made a study of his prison, a thing in which he had taken no interest before.

"Tight as wax," he said. "Ain't a hole you could git water through. But if old Skinny thinks I'm a-goin' to stay here I bet he's goin' to be took in."

When the keeper came with his breakfast Joe for the first time observed him. It was the same stalwart fellow as before.

"Come back to yerself, youngster, have you?" he demanded. "I thought you were too thick-skulled to be toppled over with a clothes pin. Got your appetite back? I'm tired of wasting good victuals on you."

"Don't git in no brain fever 'bout that," retorted Joe. "I'm goin' fur that grub. Soon's you git tired o' feedin' me, let it out. I'll toddle. Don't see no use stayin' here."

"You'll go when we are ready to let you go, youngster. You won't play your old trick with us, now mind."

"Jist you see if I don't hammer out a new 'un," returned Joe. "I ain't goin' to stay here, and 'tain't in your boots to keep me here. Ain't goin' jist yet, though. Want to feed up fu'st. I'll let you know, so's you kin say good-by."

The fellow laughed and left the room, while Joe turned to his breakfast with a powerful appetite.

"He thinks I'm funnin'," he muttered. "But I'm in solid airnest. I didn't ax fur this room, and I'm goin' to git. Wonder what's come o'

Jack Bledsoe. Mebbe they've nabbed him too, and got him salted somewhere 'bout this shanty."

His breakfast concluded the alert boy took a closer survey of his prison, examining its every nook and corner with the sharpness of an expert. His scrutiny resulted in his finding, among some rubbish on the shelf of a closet, a broken-bladed pocket-knife. All the small blades were gone, and the large blade was broken in half. But the part which remained seemed strong and sharp.

"Jolly papers!" cried the boy, dancing a jig in his delight. "I've hearn tell o' folks gittin' outer prison with a tenpenny nail, or a piece o' hoop iron. Wonder if I can chop my way out with this knife? Goin' to try, anyhow."

Armed with his new weapon he made a fresh study of the situation. The door was solid. There were no panels he could cut out. The window blind could not safely be tampered with. There remained the walls and the floor.

The floor was the safest; as his work would be hid with the carpet. He trod it carefully, feeling for a soft or yielding spot.

At one point, near the window, it seemed to give beneath his tread. Joe kneeled down and thrust his hand under the edge of the carpet. The floor boards felt soft and crumbly to his fingers.

A noise admonished him. He sprung up and hid the marks of his work. It was the keeper returning for the breakfast dishes.

He had hardly retired from the room before the eager boy was again at his task. With the aid of the knife-blade he removed the carpet-tacks for some distance, and threw it back on the floor.

"Guess I got a good six hours 'fore that galoot pokes his snout in again," he muttered. "Now, let's see what's afloat."

The point he had felt in the floor now lay revealed before his eyes. He saw at once the cause of its peculiar feel. One of the boards, for the space of a foot or two in length, had been attacked by dry rot. It was evident it could be easily cut.

Joe at once commenced operations. The half blade that remained proved to be sharp. It cut readily into the yielding wood. He began his operations at a point where the row of nails showed the situation of the joist.

It was necessary to be very careful. Any noise might give the alarm to watchful ears below. Yet the keen knife made its way slowly through the wood, cutting out a narrow chip. In less than an hour's work he had reached the joist below. The first part of his task was done.

He now attacked the same board at the next joist, as indicated by the nails. The dry rot extended to this point, and he was not long in making his way through.

He had thus cut out a section of the floor-board of a foot in length, and between the rows of nails, so that nothing held it but its grooved connection to the adjoining boards.

A few long cuts of the knife settled this. Using the blade as a pry he lifted the piece of board from its place in the floor.

Joe paused and listened intently. He rose and held his ear at the keyhole of the door. It

would not pay to be caught at his labor just now.

All was silent. He returned. Before him was the yawning cavity in the floor, bounded by the two joists, a foot apart. Beneath them lay the lath and plaster of the ceiling of a lower room.

Joe scratched his head as he looked down into the hole.

"Wonder what they keep down there?" he asked himself. "Don't want to jump outer the fryin'-pan into the fire. Allers best look fu'st and jump afterward."

There was one way to find out. Carefully scratching away the plaster he soon had a lookout hole excavated through it, of the size of his little finger.

This gave him a narrow glimpse of the room below. Yet there was nothing to be seen but a small space of the floor, a chair and a corner of a table.

While he looked a man crossed the room, treading heavily. Only his arm came within the boy's range of sight.

Joe drew back as quickly as if he was himself in full view. He closed up his sight-hole with a piece of the plaster, in fear lest it might be seen from below.

"All hunky yit," said the resolute boy. "If that chap thinks this chicken's goin' to stay in his hen-coop, he's off his eggs the wu'st way. Jolly Joe ain't nobody's fool."

He recommenced his labor. But his task had grown more difficult. The next board was sound and solid, and the broken blade very slowly made its way down into the hard wood.

But time and perseverance can accomplish much. The blade at length touched the joist. Another cut was made.

"Guess that'll do fur a mornin's work," thought Joe. "Must be gittin' on to grub time. Lawsee, wouldn't that coon be wild if he knowed how I was spilin' his real estate! Guess I'll lock up till arter dinner."

Carefully replacing the board in its place, after sweeping the chips into the cavity, he re-laid the carpet and stuck the tacks into their old holes. He then hid the weapon, for fear of a possible search.

"Prime as wax-works," ejaculated Joe. "That's jist the steadiest job I ever put through, and I calkerlate I've 'arned my dinner. The sooner old nincompoop totes along the grub the better I'll like it. I s'pose he'd fatch me extry rations if he knowed what I've been 'bout."

He had not long to wait. His dinner appeared. Joe was as innocent as a lamb.

"Tain't comf'able to keep a little chap as never done nothin' locked up this-a-way. Ain't you goin' to let me out mister?"

"Can't afford to part with you yet. You're too good-looking."

"You mought let me go. My mammy's wantin' me home."

"Let her want. Don't hurt our feelings."

"You're a jolly dead-beat, that's what you are," cried Joe. "If I was big enough I'd punch your ugly snout."

He flung himself on the bed with a great show of testiness.

The man laughed as he turned away.

"If I got you between my thumb and finger, little chap, you'd squeal like a pig in a gate."

Joe made no answer. He had other business on hand than to chaff with this man.

Dinner was not fairly over ere he was at it again, industriously chopping away at the hard wood of the floor. By night he had a hole big enough to let his body through.

His operations were brought to an end by the sound of voices in the room below. Removing the plug of plaster, he looked heedfully down. Below him sat a man whom he had not before seen—a bullet-headed fellow with a very prominent nose, which was all that Joe could make out from his bird's-eye view.

There was another, out of his line of sight, but whose voice was that of the keeper. Joe carefully scraped the hole a little larger with the edge of his knife-blade. He listened intently to their conversation, every word of which came to his ears.

"To-night," said the keeper, in a tone of deep significance, "he comes, but he goes not. The cage is ready for the bird."

"Jack Bledsoe; was that the name?"

Joe started violently. What did this mean? Was his friend threatened with some deadly peril? The boy clinched his fists significantly.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ASTONISHED PAIR OF ROGUES.

NIGHT had fallen when Jack Bledsoe descended from the train at the thriving village of Grafton, in western Ohio. He looked curiously around him. The place was a very pretty one, and he gave an approving nod as he passed up its main street in search of the hotel.

"Guess it will do. Supper first and then business. I don't more than half-believe in that ugly rogue who sent me here; but if he tries to work a traverse on Jack Bledsoe, he'll find he's got a wide-awake baby to handle!"

The supper ended, Jack started out afresh, having first got directions to the place he wished to seek. It was now quite dark, but for such light as came from the stars.

"A wise man would wait for daylight, I reckon," he said to himself; "but I ain't a wise man. I'm one of those headstrong idiots that like to put my jobs through on the run, and I'm not going to give that confounded sharp time to lay traps for this possum. Got two jobs in hand: one is to get Jolly Joe out of limbo, the other is to hit the right side of Maud Weatherly. Somehow I think I'm getting spoony on that young lady."

The place he sought was outside the village proper. It was a brick house of no great size, that stood alone in an open space off from the line of the main street.

Jack took a side-squint at this mansion, and felt in his pistol-pocket.

"Looks seedy. Best have my persuader ready. Maybe it'd be wise to go back and get a witness. Guess not, though. Reckon I can lay my swath."

A heavy rat-tat at the door of the house brought no immediate answer. It had to be repeated before the door opened.

There appeared a sour-faced man, holding a

lamp, who kept the door half-closed, as if afraid of intruders.

"Guess this is the diggings I'm after," queried Jack. "Phil Brady is my game. Don't he hang out here?"

"That depends. What is your business?"

"That's my business." The impulsive Westerner pushed open the door, and entered in the face of the scowling fellow. "Where I come from we don't keep men dancing their heels at the door. Chaps of my size and shape like to hold their confabs inside."

"Excuse me," said the man, with a surly attempt at apology. "There are so many tramps around that we've got to be keerful. What name did you say?"

"I don't know as I said any. But when I mount my handle I sail under the name of Jack Bledsoe."

A quick change of expression passed over the fellow's face, which Jack did not fail to mark.

"So," he said to himself. "He expects me then? He has been warned. I must look sharp for thorns."

The man led to a room on the second floor, placed the lamp on a table, and remarked:

"Make yourself comfortable for a minute. I will hunt Phil. He is somewhere about the place."

He quickly left the room. Jack was alone. He seated himself, drew his pistol, and quietly examined its condition.

"I don't quite relish the lay of the land," he muttered. "Things look sulphury. I may have use for this persuader."

A peculiar sound attracted his attention. He started and looked keenly around him. Nothing was visible. Some fragments of plaster fell on the floor at his feet. Jack sprung up and backed himself into a corner of the room.

"Are the dogs working up a game on me?" he muttered. "Blast their ugly pictures I'll salt somebody if they try it."

"Beware!" spoke a cautious voice. "They've got it laid ag'in you."

The voice came from the ceiling. Jack's keen eyes quickly traversed it, but he saw nothing except what seemed a slight break in the plaster on the opposite side of the room.

Ere he could investigate further the door of the room opened, and the man he had already seen entered, followed by Joe's burly jailer.

"Want to see me?" he asked, shortly.

"Phil Brady?"

"That's my name."

"Then you're my man. Suppose we come to anchor. I've got a trifle of business." Jack helped himself to a chair, and motioned the others to be seated as coolly as if he was the owner of the house. "I jist dropped round here to take charge of the rat that you keep in this hole."

"What do you mean?" asked Brady, with a show of surprise.

"Read that, and it may save words."

He passed over the note he had received from the gambler.

"Recognize that signature?"

"Yes."

"Then read the contents, and let us get down to dots."

Brady read it with great care. His eyes wandered furtively from the paper to the face of his associate. A look passed between them, which Jack did not fail to notice.

"According to this I am to hand over to you a certain boy named Joe Jorum."

"Just so."

"And in return you are to give me a certain document, here named."

"That's the size of it."

"Very well. As you know so much I will acknowledge that I have the boy in charge. I am ready to obey this order. Pass over the document, and the boy is yours."

"Pass over the boy, and the document is yours."

"At least show me that you have the document. I am here in a position of trust, I can run no risks."

"My word was enough for the master, I must show my papers to the man," laughed Jack. "All right, my cove. I do my work straight, but I don't blame you for caution. Here is the passport."

He drew the folded paper from his pocket, and held it up before Brady's eyes, so that he could read what was written on the outside.

"Now, my friend, you have had your sight. I demand mine. Tit for tat is the game."

"Tit for tit, I fancy," cried Brady, as he darted forward with an unexpected spring, and snatched the document from Jack's hand.

The latter was taken by surprise by the sudden and rapid movement. It was a second before he recovered his wits. Then with a quick action he drew his revolver and covered his assailant with it.

"That was neatly done, my noble sport," he declared, "but if you don't pass that back quicker than the wink of a flea's eye I'll show you a little circus trick we have out West. You want to be posted in the way we start our graveyards."

Jack's coolness had returned; but in the momentary excitement he had failed to notice the movements of the second man. At this instant a heavy cane, flung by this man, took him in the pistol hand, with so smart a stroke that the weapon was hurled from his fingers half-across the room, while his hand was benumbed by the shock.

Ere he could recover, the two men flung themselves upon him.

Only his left hand was fit for duty, and with that he struck out so shrewdly that one of his assailants toppled over to the floor.

But ere he could repeat the blow Brady grappled with him, grasped him in his strong arms, and bore him down backward by sheer weight.

The other fellow was quickly on his feet again, his face inflamed by rage, a long-bladed knife in his hand.

"Pinion him, Phil, and I'll settle him. There's cash in it. And dead men tell no tales."

Jack struggled fiercely, but he had been taken at a disadvantage, and his right hand and wrist were lamed.

He was borne to the floor, and held immovable, in the powerful grip of his antagonist.

The other fellow sprung furiously forward, brandishing the murderous-looking weapon,

It looked bad for the daring Westener at that moment. It seemed as if only a miracle could save him.

"Tip him over, and I'll settle his hash."

His words were lost in a cracking sound that seemed to come from above. It was followed by a loud crash, and a considerable section of the ceiling came down in a mass, square upon his head, burling him to the floor with its weight.

"Oh, Jersey! I'm killed! I'm blinded!" he yelled, writhing away as if in mortal pain. "Ah! I'm a dead man!"

"What in the blue blazes is that?" screamed Brady. "By thunder, the job has got to be put through, if the whole sky falls!"

He snatched the knife dropped by his unlucky associate, and while he held his prisoner down with one hand he raised the deadly weapon aloft with the other.

"Say your prayers, for your time's up."

Jack shut his eyes involuntarily. Death seemed staring him in the face.

But just at the instant that the muscular arm of the murderer seemed about to fall, a heavy object shot down through the air, and struck him below the elbow with such force, that the arm doubled over like a hinged stick. The bone was broken.

"Hey fer our side! That's Jolly Joe's signoator!" came a youthful voice in shrill accents from above.

Brady, with a savage curse, pressed yet more firmly on his prisoner, and with indomitable fury reached for the fallen knife with his left hand.

But down through the gaping hole in the ceiling extended a boy's legs. They were followed by his body, and Joe dropped through the aperture, landing square on the shoulders of the burly villain below.

"Lord save us!" he yelled in agony and fright. "What's that?"

"Thunder and lightnin', and blue blazes to the back o' t," answered Joe. "Fling him off, Jack. Thought I'd drop down and see how things was goin' on. Toss off the galoot."

Jack, no less astonished than his villainous assailants, hastened to take advantage of this diversion. The groaning fellow above him was tossed aside with a quick writhe of his agile frame, and he sprung nimbly to his feet.

Brady had been half-crushed by the heavy weight of the falling boy, and lay groaning in pain, his broken arm dropping useless by his side.

His confederate was yet yelling in agony, and clutching at his eyes, which had been filled with a shower of the falling plaster-dust.

"Where under the sun did you come from?" asked Jack, as he hastened to regain his pistol.

"Dropped down through the ceilin'. Ginerally come that way when the stairs ain't handy. Sent a basket o' plaster, and a hunk o' floor lumber ahead, so's not to take nobody by surprise. Hope I ain't hurt nobody's feelin's."

"You imp of the devil!" yelled Brady. "I'll kill you yet for this, as sure as I'm a living man!"

"Shet up yer speakin'-trumpet, and save it to skeer frogs outer the ponds," answered Joe, in

contempt. "What's you foolin' 'bout, Jack Bledsoe? Where's yer dokymen? Them gem boats didn't play no fair game, and I reckon it's yourn yit! Them let me out? Nary time. Not much let 'bout that. Go for the dokymen. He stuck it in his coat-pocket. I was looking down through a little peep-hole I had, and seen the whole biz."

Thus admonished, Jack hastened to recover his lost paper from his groaning foe, who was past making any resistance.

"Now let's git. Guess these chaps'll come to arter a while."

Jack looked back on his discomfited foes. Brady was completely laid out. His associate was crawling away in search of water to wash his smarting eyes.

"Reckon you've had your rations," remarked Jack. "I'll send somebody up from the village to look after you."

"Much I would," exclaimed Joe, bitterly. "Arter the'r tryin' to kill you, and keepin' me locked up in a rat-hole. I wouldn't send 'em a blind puppy dog. Slide's the word, afore they rig up some other contraption."

"No further fear from them. The starch is all out," answered Jack, as he followed the indignant boy from the room. Jolly Joe had decidedly played the trump card in the game.

CHAPTER XII.

TELEGRAPHING AND RAILROADING.

THE business establishment of Wetmore, Brown & Co. was in full activity. Salesmen were bustling about, porters shifting heavy packages, customers coming and going.

Among them walked up and down the senior member of the firm, Mr. Wetmore, with an anxious look upon his face which he sought in vain to hide.

He strode about the store like an unquiet spirit, finding fault in a dozen quarters, and making everybody as miserable as himself.

"Bet he had horse-nails for breakfast, and one of them has stuck crossways in his gizzard," growled one of the vexed salesmen.

At this moment a telegraph messenger boy hustled into the store.

"A message for Mr. Wetmore," he announced.

"All right!" exclaimed the merchant, snatching it eagerly. "You need not wait, boy. If there is any answer, I will send it to the office."

The lad went whistling away, while Wetmore hurried to a secluded portion of the store with his telegram, as if he wished to avoid observation.

He was wise in doing so, for a marked expression of dismay, rage and fright, came upon his face while reading it. A harsh oath rose to his lips, mingled with a burst of hot fury.

He cast his eyes again over the telegram, while his visage grew pallid. Its purport was the following:

"The game's up, and the bank bursted. The cubs are loose. Look out for yourself. I'm settled with a broken arm and a sprained back. Tom is blinded with plaster. They have salted our mackerel. It is your turn next. Beware." PHIL BRADY."

The discomfited merchant crushed the paper

in his hand, while a volley of curses broke from his pale lips.

"The rascally idiots! That's what comes of trusting my work to others. If I had got two months more I could have left them all to whistle. But there's not a minute to waste. Bledsoe has that fatal paper. I must snatch all and run."

He hurried through the store.

"Hey, Wetmore!" exclaimed Mr. Brown, who had just entered. "Whither away so fast?"

"I have got a dispatch that my uncle is very ill," answered the merchant. "I must go at once. You will have to run things, Brown."

"Very well. I thought you looked out of sorts. Go ahead. We will manage."

At almost the same moment in which this scene was happening, Maud Weatherly, in her up-town home, also received a telegraphic message.

She read it with little less emotion than her uncle had read his.

"I have unmasked a den of reptiles," it ran. "The boy is safe. I owe him my life a second time. W. is a rogue in grain. I will be back as fast as steam can carry me. We must work lively, or our bird will fly. Watch him." JACK BLEDSOE."

She walked up and down her room uneasily.

"What is to be done?" she asked herself. "Watch him! How can I? Had I better see Mr. Brown, and let him into the secret of our operations? I will. My fortune is at risk, and there is no time to lose."

She ordered the carriage, put on a street dress, and prepared to seek her uncle's establishment.

Within a half-hour she was rolling rapidly into town in a luxurious turn-out.

But she had not got half way to the store ere her resolution wavered.

"I will be sure to find my uncle there. What shall I say? It will be an awkward meeting. I know nothing. Mr. Bledsoe has been too foolishly secret. Mr. Brown may let the affair out to my rascal of an uncle, and spoil the whole business."

"Where shall I drive?" asked the coachman.

"To Montague's drygoods store," she quickly decided.

Had she known all that was involved in that decision, she would have come to a very different conclusion. Only bare chance prevented it from being utterly ruinous.

Late that afternoon, after her return home, a second telegram came to her. This proved to be from her uncle. It ran as follows:

"I will not be home to-night. Have hasty business calling me to Jacksonville. May be absent for a day or two." G. WETMORE."

Here was new food for thought. In her present state of mind, everything seemed suspicious. She sat down and fell into a deep reflection, sorry now that she had given up her intention to call on Mr. Brown.

"I don't know what to do," she testily exclaimed. "I am not fit for business. When will Mr. Bledsoe be here? I feel lost without him."

A soft look came into her eyes, and a faint

blush to her cheek, as she reclined in her soft-cushioned chair.

"Why does he not come?" she murmured. "I fear I think less of my fortune than of him. There is something in his eyes—something—"

Her voice fell away. A tender look came upon her face. Had bold Jack Bledsoe been there at that moment, his suit would have been easily won.

At that moment he was seated, side by side with Jolly Joe in a railroad car, that was rolling eastward at Express speed.

They had come hundreds of miles since morning, and were rapidly approaching their destination.

"What are you thinking about, boy?" asked Jack, after a long silence.

"Tryin' to git it inter shape," answered Joe. "Sure o' one thing, anyhow. I'm glad as a frog in a mill-pond."

"Glad. What about?"

"Oh, 'bout everything! Glad I'm alive to begin on. Glad you didn't kick the bucket, fur next. Glad 'cause grub's plenty, thirdly. Got past 'tater-skin diet, and cum up ter strawberries and short-cake. Ain't that suthin' to make a feller feel spunky?"

"It never troubled me much."

"'Cause you ain't seen life. You ain't been weaned in the gutter, like I was. Nothin' like hard times to make a feller spry. Fourthly, I'm glad 'cause we're goin' ter salt old Skiny. Lawsee, that's better nor sugared-down strawberries! I ain't down on nobody much, 'cept him. But I'm down on him orful. Saved it all up fur him."

"Come, come, Joe, you shouldn't bear malice."

"Don't. Not a bit," answered Joe earnestly. "'Tain't me as hates him like rank p'isen. It's in my bones. Dunno how it got there, and can't help it comin' out."

Jack laughed at this explanation. He leaned back in his seat, lost in reflection.

"Do you know how much I won at faro, on the strength of your ten-dollar bit?" he at length asked.

"Bout ten thousand," answered Joe.

"About twenty, I fancy. I went back and gave them another shake, my boy. Struck another ten. Now see here, Joe, fair play's fair play. Half this plunder is yours."

"Mine!" answered Joe, opening his eyes widely. "Why, you don't owe me only ten dollars."

"We were partners, Joe, I owe you half."

"Nary time. We wasn't pards."

"I wouldn't have won a cent only for your money and your luck."

"Oh, that's taffy! Like ter know what I'd do with sich a pile as that? All I want's grub and shoes. Reckon I kin pick up the balance."

"You are worth ten thousand dollars, Joe. I am going to put it out at interest for you. I am not going to let you live like a vagrant."

"Goin' inter stocks?" asked Joe, with wide-open eyes. "Margins?"

"Not much," laughed Jack. "I'd sooner invest in faro. It's a safer kind of gambling. See here, boy, you will want some pocket-money. Nobody can tell what may happen in

our hunt for Wetmore. Something may turn up where money will come in handy. Here. Stuff this in your pocket, and don't lose it."

He handed Joe a fat roll of notes.

Joe opened his eyes in delighted amazement.

"It's 'nough to take my breath," he ejaculated. "How much is ther in that pile? Never see'd sich a heap in my born days."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Jack, indifferently. "Look out for your pockets, that's all. You might get among thieves."

"S'pose any on 'em kin go through me?" cried Joe. "Guess you don't know this coon. Like ter see the best chap goin' ter git a nickel outer my pocket on the sly. I been there, now you bet."

It was eight o'clock that evening when the train at length rolled into the depot of the city to which they were bound, and the two travelers stepped to the platform, and stretched their limbs after their long ride.

"A trifle of supper to begin with," said Jack, as he led the way to the restaurant.

This dispatched, he turned to Joe.

"I have an errand which I prefer to do alone," he said. "You stay about here till I come back. I won't be more than an hour or two away."

"All right. I'll be 'round. Got no place special to go to, and kin kill time here 'bout as well as anywhere."

"Look out for your cash, Joe."

"Guess I will. Goin' to 'vest some more on it. Ain't had half supper 'nough yet. Holler all the way down to my big toes."

Jack laughed as he hurried away. Joe lounged back toward the restaurant.

In less than an hour afterward Maud Weatherly started hastily up and dropped the book she had been lazily reading, as the name of Mr. Bledsoe was announced at the door.

The pink flush that came to her cheeks, as she stood in momentary confusion, showed the direction of her thoughts.

"I hoped to see you to-night," she murmured.

"You were bound to," answered Jack, "except there had been a railroad blow-up."

He hastened forward and warmly grasped her extended hand, while his bold eyes were so full of admiration that hers involuntarily fell before him.

The shrewd fellow held her hand longer than there was any call for, while they stood for a minute in silence together.

"Will you be seated?" she asked softly. "I received your telegram. I am so anxious to hear the whole story."

"I have had something of an adventure," he answered. "But first tell me about your uncle. Has anything happened? Is he in the house?"

"No; he will not be home to-night. He is absent at Jacksonville on business."

Jack's face fell. A whistle of surprise and dismay came from his lips.

"Excuse me," he asked. "You took me aback. I fear he has gone further than Jacksonville. I must see Mr. Brown at once. There may be no time to lose. Do you know where he lives?"

"Yes!" she answered, excitedly.

"Will you go with me? He does not know me."

"Certainly! Is it dangerous? Do you think he has taken flight?"

She had grown red and eager with excitement.

"I can tell nothing about that. But it is better to be sure than sorry."

She rung the bell for a servant.

"Have the carriage got ready instantly!" she commanded.

"Tell me what has happened, Mr. Bledsoe. I cannot wait," she eagerly demanded.

Jack began the story of his adventure. He was interrupted by the announcement of the carriage. He continued it in the carriage. To say that the good fellow enjoyed the situation would be speaking very mildly. It was heaven to him to sit so close to Maud Weatherly, and to see the rapt attention in her beautiful eyes.

Mr. Brown received his visitors with surprise. It was changed to alarm when he heard their errand. His excitement grew intense as Jack proceeded with his story.

"Wetmore run a gambling-den in disguise? You are romancing, sir!"

"Not a bit. It's solid fact. I can bring you an ocean of proof."

Jack went on with his story.

"Tried to murder you? I cannot believe that!"

"I have my witness handy."

"I have doubted him for months," broke in Maud. "I fear that your business and my fortune are both in serious peril."

"I can hardly credit it. Yet some strange things have happened. Where is that document you speak of?"

Jack silently passed over the important paper, for whose safe keeping he had so nearly lost his life.

Mr. Brown cast his eyes hastily over it, while an extraordinary change came upon his countenance.

"By Heaven, this proves all and more!" he exclaimed, in intense excitement. "This is a terrible witness of his duplicity! A contract with Barnes, of Toledo, to invest fifty thousand of the firm's funds in a speculative venture! And I knew nothing of it! I have been standing on the brink of ruin without a dream of danger! I must work at once, sir. Excuse me for haste. Will you accompany me to the store?"

"No; I must see Miss Weatherly home, and I have another errand."

"Come early to-morrow, then. I may be there all night."

A half-hour afterward Jack left Maud at her door, with a pressure of her hand and a look into her tender eyes that spoke volumes.

It was past eleven o'clock when he reached the railroad station and looked for Joe, whom he had almost forgotten.

No Joe was to be seen.

"Tired out and sought shelter, I suppose. I must do the same."

The next morning he was at the depot again, but still there was no sign of Joe,

It was ten o'clock when he reached the store of Wetmore, Brown & Co. Mr. Brown was seated disconsolately in the office.

"Ruined!" he said, with a trembling accent. "He has defaulted with all the available funds of the firm. It is a fatal blow."

Before noon that day it was known far and wide on the street that the firm of Wetmore, Brown & Co. had suspended payment, and that the senior partner had fled with all the cash funds of the firm.

Another party had disappeared. Jolly Joe was nowhere to be found. Jack sought him in vain. He had vanished.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHASE BY RAIL.

WHAT had become of Jolly Joe? That is the next question to be settled. We must return to the railroad station on the night on which he had been left there to await his friend's return. Joe was such an uneasy customer that the only way to follow him up is to keep a sharp eye on his movements.

After Jack Bledsoe's departure he had returned to the restaurant, and finished his hasty supper.

Joe was now a very different looking boy from the ragged customer he had appeared when we first saw him. He was neatly dressed, and looked as self-possessed as any millionaire. In fact the roll of bank-notes in his pocket gave him a certain feeling of importance.

"None o' you lords and dukes kin come squintin' round me," he said to himself, as he strutted about the room as proud as a peacock. "Guess I'm 'bout as hefty as the best on ye. If ye on'y knowed the size o' my pile ye'd squelch. You bet Jack Bledsoe's a square hoss. He's equal to a pair o' mules and a dog-cart, he is."

An hour passed slowly by. Joe lounged about, or reclined on the seats, carelessly watching the throng of people who passed through in a steady stream, to and from trains.

Another half-hour passed. He rose and stretched his limbs.

"Wish Jack'd hurry up," he said. "Ain't goin' to locate here all night. Guess somehow I've 'arned a snooze."

The boy's soliloquy ended in a violent start. His eyes had at that moment fallen on a face that quickly changed the current of his thoughts. He turned away, not caring to be recognized in turn, and after a moment's hesitation followed the party he had seen.

It was a large-sized man, dressed in a light tweed suit, and wearing a slouched hat, that was drawn low down on his forehead. The lower part of the face was covered by a heavy mustache and beard.

He held a handkerchief in his hand, which he kept applying to his face, as if troubled with a bad cold.

"Won't do, Skinny," said the boy delightedly. "Can't fool Joe Jorum if you'd sew yerself up in a pig's skin. I'd know them eyes o' yourn if I see'd them in the top of a wooden pump. But what are you arter? That's the go. Ain't off travelin' or nothin', I spose?"

He followed to the ticket office, and managed

to push in very close behind the traveler whom he had recognized as Mr. Wetmore in disguise.

"One through ticket for Chicago," said the traveler.

Joe slipped aside as his prey received the ticket and backed out, again applying the handkerchief to his face.

The boy fell into a quandary. What was to be done? It was necessary to make up his mind on the jump. Wetmore was traveling in disguise. He was making unusual efforts to hide his face. It looked decidedly like a flight for life.

Joe took off his cap and scratched his head for ideas. Less than a minute was enough for him to make up his mind.

"It's neck or nothin' now," he said. "S'pose Jack'll be dis'p'nted, but 'tain't my fault. Got sudden bizness in Chicago."

Within two minutes more the wide-awake boy had obtained a ticket and was on his way to the train. He had lost sight of his game, but that did not matter. He had his fox holed.

Joe hustled up to the train gate, but to his surprise and dismay it was at that instant sharply closed.

"Hello, mister!" he cried. "What's that fur? I'm off fur Chicago, and here's the dokyment."

"Too late," said the gatekeeper briefly.

"Too late?"

"Yes. The train's off. Yonder it goes. You'd want to fly like a gull to take that train now."

"That's rich," cried Joe. "That's sweeter ner loaf sugar. You dunno how nice I feel. When does the next train go, mister?"

"At ten o'clock to-morrow."

"Glad to hear that. Next year 'd be as good. What am I to do with this bit o' paper?"

"Frame it, and keep it for a mantel ornament," retorted the gatekeeper, a little miffed.

"Guess I will. Much 'bliged," answered Joe, as he walked away.

He was feeling decidedly blue despite his chaff. When Joe made up his mind he meant business, and it was a bitter pill for him to be caught in a net like this. The more he thought of it the more sure he was that Wetmore was playing a runaway game.

"If he slides now it's all up," thought the disconsolate boy. "I know it'd been money in my pocket to nab him. And there's Miss Maud. He's slidin' off with her money like dust afore the wlnd. Got a big notion to punch my head. Took two minutes to make up my mind, and lost the game by one minute. Never took two seconds afore, and I've got pegged out neat fur wastin' so much time."

By this time he had again reached the ticket office.

"Here's yer bit o' pasteboard, mister," he announced. "Guess I'll take my cash back again, if you don't mind."

"What do you mean?"

"On'y as you had no biz to sell me a ticket arter the train had skooted. Didn't want no train 'cept that 'un. If I can't make time, I kin stay home."

"I thought you were in time," explained the

agent. "You are in a hurry, then, to make Chicago?"

"Well, I'd smile. It's wuss than a hurry. I'm arter my fortune, and that there train's slid off with it."

The ticket-seller looked quizzically at the boy, not quite sure what to make of him.

"Best slide over to New York," he advised. "There's a Lake Shore train you can catch, that will reach Chicago as soon as this."

Joe sprung up and cracked his heels in delight. All was not lost yet.

"Honest Injun?" he demanded.

"Yes. Let me have your ticket. I will exchange it for one on the Lake Shore. It will be three dollars more."

"Don't keer fur that. Money ain't no 'count to me. Got 'nough to buy out your old road if I wanted to go in the railroad line, which I don't jist yet."

He planked down the money, and received the new ticket.

"You're a lively little rat," said the agent, with a laugh. "Now slide. The York train pulls out in two minutes. Good luck go with you."

"Much 'bliged, mister. I'll try not to run away from it."

Joe hurried for the train again, glad at heart at his renewed luck.

He was in time now, and was aboard a car in a minute more.

Three hours afterward he stepped aboard the westward-bound train in the New York depot.

"On time, you bet," said the delighted boy. "Hope so, anyhow. It's a long race, and it's hard to tell which iron hoss is goin' to beat. But I'm not goin' into no brain-fever 'bout that. Got my bet on old Lake Shore, and if it don't come up to the winnin'-post a neck ahead, I'll draw from the pool, square. All I want now's a sleepin'-car and a snooze. I'm travelin' first-class, now you bet. Ain't no common folks style 'bout me. And if there's a chap 'board the train kin beat me on a snooze, I'll sell him my hat."

Joe meant it. A blow-up of the engine would hardly have wakened him from his deep slumber, which lasted until long after daybreak the next morning. All that day and night the train rolled on, and at eight o'clock the succeeding morning pulled into the station at Chicago.

The alert boy lost no time in springing from the car. There was not a second to lose. His only hope now was in a few moments' delay in the rival train. He ran along the platform and jumped into a cab.

"Drive like old Joe," he cried. "To the West Side Depot. Got to git there afore the train. Pay you extra if you make it."

"It is due now."

"S'pose I don't know that? Drive."

The cab rolled away through the streets of Chicago at a lively gait. Joe's anxiety increased with every moment. Was he going to win or lose? Had his hot race been for nothing? A very few minutes would tell. As they neared the West Side station he gazed curiously out of the cab window at the passing people and vehicles. Men were passing with valises in

their hands. Was the train in? It looked decidedly squally.

Suddenly Joe pulled the check-string of the cab. The driver bent down.

"Turn like lightnin'," exclaimed Joe. "Chase that cab that jist passed us. Run it down, fur it's got my game in it. Ye're good fur a fiver if you foller it to baste."

The wide-awake boy had caught a glimpse of a familiar tweed suit in the opposite cab. He shot at sight. In a minute more his vehicle was in sharp pursuit of the one in advance.

During this flight and pursuit matters were not at rest in the city which the alert boy had so hastily left. The report of the failure of Wetmore, Brown & Co. had spread far and wide, and the flight of the senior partner was the topic of the newspapers and the talk of the town.

Nor was the interest diminished when it was found that he had not been satisfied with defaulting with the firm's money to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars, but had also swallowed up an equal sum from his niece, of whom he had been guardian.

All the cash of the business was gone, and heavy debts were pressing. It was sure ruin. The liabilities were ahead of the assets, and Mr. Brown was beside himself with shame and despair.

But as the investigation proceeded the surprise of the community increased. The unsuspected fact came out that Wetmore had been for a year past conducting a heavy gambling business.

The police, wakened up at last when it was too late, made an investigation of the various places at which the game had been played. But nothing but some useless apparatus was found. Bankers, dealers and players alike had skipped.

During this investigation, as may be imagined, Jack Bledsoe did not fail to do his best to keep up the spirits of his fair friend, Maud Weatherly. She was angry and disconsolate, but the bold fellow managed to soothe her anger and raise her spirits.

"He has not given us the slip yet," he declared. "It's a big country, but it's a hard one to hide in. Do you know I've a notion that that's what's become of Jolly Joe. The boy is not to be found. He may be on the track of the runaway."

He was interrupted by the entrance of a servant with a telegram for Maud. She tore it open with feverish haste.

"You are right," she cried quickly and gladly. "Read that. The boy is a jewel."

Jack seized the paper and read hastily:

"I'm hot after Skinny. Struck his trail. Got him tracked to his den. Write by next mail."

"JOE JORUM."

"Lovely!" exclaimed Jack. "Chicago, eh? The game's ripe. I'll bet high on Jolly Joe."

CHAPTER XIV.

WORKING HIS WAY.

"How much is figs a pound, mister?"

It was Jolly Joe that asked this question, of a groceryman on a corner of a main street in Chicago.

"Don't keep them."

"Got any cheese and crackers?"

"Yes."

"Guess I'll take half a pound apiece. Fling 'em out lively."

The groceryman weighed out the articles demanded.

"S'pose you don't mind me squattin' down round here, and takin' a lunch?"

"I don't keep a restaurant, boy."

"Sort o' high-toned, are ye? Kind o' tony street this, ain't it?" asked Joe, nibbling at his crackers.

"It is one of the finest streets in Chicago," answered the merchant, somewhat gratified. "There are some very rich people live around here."

"Looks like it, that's a fact," said Joe, biting off a bit of cheese. "Now that brown-stone turn-out down yander, with festooned porticoes. S'pose some o' your big-bugs hang out there."

Joe had coolly seated himself on a box, and gnawed away at his lunch as he spoke. The house to which he pointed was one of the most showy edifices on the street, and seemed only fit for the residence of a man of considerable wealth.

"That house," answered the groceryman, anxious to show off the points of the neighborhood. "That is one of our dark horses. It has been shut up for the last three months. It has been recently bought, I am told, by a wealthy Californian. Some parties have been in it since yesterday morning. Who they are I don't know. Nobody has been seen since but a servant, who came over here to buy provisions."

"That's mighty curious," answered Joe, with a great show of interest. "Wonder if they're hidin'. Dunno the gin'leman's name?"

"Mr. Oliver Jenkins, they call him."

"Oliver!" exclaimed Joe, with a start.

"What ails you, boy?"

"On'y I used to know somebody o' that name. Guess 'tain't the same joker. Good-by. Come round ag'in when I want a lunch."

Joe had finished his crackers and cheese. He lounged away, up and down the street in front of the house, every door and window of which were critically examined. Then he made his way round toward the rear of the mansion.

It opened on a narrow street, which ran between a double row of mansions, fronting on opposite streets. Many of them had stables and coach-houses, opening on this alley.

It was not easy to tell to which houses these belonged. Joe returned to the main street, and counted the number of houses from the corner to that in which he was interested. By making a similar count on the back street he was able to strike the rear of this mansion. He found there a low brick stable, which just then was tightly closed.

"So far so good," said the young spy. "Get the lay o' the land. That's suthin'. Now it's to set my trap and bait it. Seems to me the old sucker's layin' low. Dunno as I'm about, I reckon."

He walked away, not caring to be seen too much about there. It was not advisable to appear to be on the watch.

Yet the shrewd boy took good care not to get

too far away. He managed to have business in that locality twenty times in the course of the day.

In the evening he was again at the grocer's, buying lunch, and asking questions.

"Seems to me you are anxious about the folks around here," said the grocer.

"Kinder," answered Joe. "Got a notion to speculate in some o' these shanties. Tired o' kickin' round the world, and want to locate."

The merchant looked oddly at the quiet-speaking boy, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"You're a honey! Bless me if you ain't! How old are you, midget?"

"Old 'nough to know cheese from mutton," retorted Joe. "Somewhere 'bout sixteen, I reckon. But I been round. I know 'bout all that's wu'th knowin'."

The grocer continued to laugh, as he turned away to wait on a new customer. This was a pretty girl, with a tripping step, and neatly dressed in cap and apron.

The grocer asked her some questions which attracted Joe's attention. But he got very short and unsatisfactory answers.

"Not much to be pumped out of that young lady," he said pettishly, as she left the store.

"Who is it?"

"One of Mr. Jenkin's, kitchen girls, I fancy. And as sly as a mouse."

"Guess I'll try. Kinder anxious 'bout that there mysterious house."

The girl had not gone straight toward the house, but was making her way to the corner, as if she designed to seek the rear entrance.

Joe was quickly close behind her. He managed indeed to jostle against her arm. One of the packages she carried fell with a crash to the pavement. The paper bag burst open and scattered its contents far and wide. It was a package of white sugar.

"Confound your awkwardness!" cried the angry girl. "See what you've done."

"Didn't go fur to do't," apologized Joe. "My foot slipped on a lemon-peel. 'Tain't no harm. We kin scrape it up ag'in."

He kneeled down and began scraping together the sugar, with a plentiful mixture of dirt.

"You little fool!" she cried. "What are you at? Do you suppose I would dare take that stuff into the house?"

"Tell you what!" cried Joe. "I'll slide back to the store and git you some more. That's on'y square s'long's I spilt it."

"All right. Have you the money?"

"Plenty of it," answered Joe, loftily. "Gobs of it. Jist you wait here. I'll be back in a twinkle."

He was as good as his word. Within five minutes he was back to where the girl waited in some doubt.

"I'm square," said Joe. "Here's yer sugar. Dunno what you want with it."

"Why?"

"Oh, you're sweet 'nough a'ready."

"Go 'way, you young rogue!" Yet her laugh showed that she was pleased.

"It's jist so. Wouldn't bumped ag'in you on'y you're so pretty. Was tryin' to git a closer squint at you."

" You're a young rascal, that's what you are," declared the girl, laughing and blushing.

" You bet I mean it. See here, Susy, you like ice cream?"

" My name ain't Susy."

" What is it?"

" Molly."

" Well, then, Molly, can't you slip out arter supper? I'll be 'round. Never like to go arter ice cream 'cept with a pretty girl like you. It's more tony, you know."

She looked at the boy with a silly laugh, hesitated a minute, and then answered:

" I cannot get out till after eight."

" That'll do. I'll be 'round. Don't miss. I'm in dead earnest."

" I will come. If you fool me—"

" Nary time. I'm sound on the goose."

She hastened away, and entered the house by the rear gate.

" Got her nailed, anyhow," thought Joe. " She'll come. That's one nail in old Skinny's coffin."

He was right. She came. The girl was certainly pretty, and was tricked out now in all her finery. She seemed somewhat in doubt about the boy, and her face lighted up on seeing him in waiting.

" Told you I was sound on the goose," declared Joe. " Tuck yer arm under my wing. What you like best? Strawberry cream or kisses?"

" Both," said the girl, with a blush.

" We'll have both, then," returned Joe. He was getting along swimmingly.

But in one respect his progress was less rapid. Over the cream he led the talk to the subject of her master, who he was, and where he had come from.

But on these points she either knew nothing, or would tell nothing. She had been engaged the day before. Mr. Jenkins came from San Francisco. She had not set eyes on him. There were several other servants. That was all she knew.

Joe was in some doubt about this. There was a certain hesitation in her answers. He fancied she had been trained against talking.

He accompanied his new friend back home. It was now dark, except where the gas lamps lit up the street.

As they reached the corner of the rear street a carriage drove out. It was impossible to tell from which of the many stables it came, yet Joe keenly eyed the driver, by the light of a neighboring lamp.

He did not get a good look at him, yet there was something familiar in the face, that made the boy anxious for another glimpse.

" Good-night," said Molly, when they reached the gate.

" Not much. I'm goin' in."

" No, no. It is against orders. We are not allowed any company in the kitchen."

" Oh, that's all taffy. I ain't company, I'm only a boy. Boys ain't company. Tell 'em I'm your cousin, if anybody pokes in."

" I'm half afeard."

" That ain't all," continued the bold boy. " You know we was to have ice cream and kisses. We ain't had the kisses yit."

She laughed and blushed, as she stood with the gate half open. Then she hastily leaned forward and kissed him.

" There! you are only a boy, you know; so it's no harm."

The next instant she was through the gate, and had slammed and bolted it behind her. Joe heard her laughing as she hastened up the steps to the house.

" Mighty fine, Miss Molly," he ejaculated. " But you don't git rid o'this chestnut burr quite as easy as that. We'll have kisses and cream 'stead of cream and kisses, next time."

Joe was not through with his day's task. He hung about the neighborhood till near midnight. He was not going without another glimpse of that coachman, if it took all night.

Finally a carriage rolled up. Joe was at hand. It stopped in front of the mysterious mansion, and a gentleman got out, so muffled up as not to be easily recognized.

But the spy was not troubled about him. It was the coachman he was after. He managed to walk close by, just as the latter closed the carriage-door, and remounted the box.

One quick glance was enough. The boy hurried on, not wishing to be observed in return.

" Jolly papers!" he cried, eagerly, as soon as he was fairly out of hearing. " Don't I know him like a book? It's the chap that has got the plaster in his eyes, or I'm no judge o' foxes. If I ain't got old Skinny nailed now there's no shucks."

He continued to cogitate as he walked on. He had his man. Should he spring the trap on him at once, or work up the game a little further?

" Guess I'll take a snooze fu'st, fur I'm tired enough fur two boys o' my size. 'Arn't my lodgin's anyhow. Maybe I mought dream out the best way to work this little trap."

If a boy could sleep sounder than Joe did for the rest of the night, and till ten o'clock the next day, it would have had to be a dead log. He wasn't troubled with any nonsense of dreams.

When he wakened up however he was wider awake than any boy ever was.

" Shill I telegraph, or shill I write?" he asked himself. " Cost like fun to say all I want on the wires. Guess I'll jist say, 'All O. K. Look out for a letter.' That'll keep 'em quiet."

Joe hurried to send his telegram, and spent the next three hours writing a letter. His education in this direction had been sadly neglected, and he barely knew how to write. It was an odd-looking document which at length left his hands.

Yet blotted, misspelled and illegible as it was it managed to tell all that had happened, and to demand the immediate presence in Chicago of Maud Weatherly, Jack Bledsoe, and Mr. Brown.

" That'll fotch 'em. I'm kinder proud o' that there dokyment," said Joe to himself, as he dropped his missive into a post-office box. " Now guess I'll take another squint round fur Molly."

It is not necessary to dwell on the events of the next two or three days. The boy had managed to see Molly more than once in that time, and had gained entrance to the kitchen despite her objections.

He had also learned a few things of import-

ance through all the secrecy that surrounded the mansion. At the end of the time mentioned a train was rapidly approaching Chicago, bearing the three persons for whom Joe had written.

The sport was ripening.

The evening hour in which it rolled into the station Joe was closeted with his fair friend, engaged in a very interesting conversation.

"Three dollars a week. That ain't schrunshin high wages."

"It's all I get, anyhow."

"And how much fur holdin' your tongue, and not talkin' 'bout things?"

"What do you mean?" asked the startled girl.

"S'pose I don't know? You're paid to keep mum. See here, Molly, ain't that a pile o' money?"

She opened her eyes wide at the roll of notes which Joe displayed.

"Now ther's some fun afloat, Molly, and I want you on our side. It's going to be a hundred dollars in your pocket if you come over."

"A hundred dollars! What am I to do?"

"Jist what I say. To the nail."

"I'll do it. I don't like this place anyhow."

"Keep mum then. Your master's a rascal and a runaway. We're arter him hot foot."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPRINGING OF THE TRAP.

THE carriage which Joe had formely observed again drove up to the door of the mysterious mansion and let out its master, as it had done on every evening since Joe's arrival in Chicago. The occupant of the house had not yet stepped into the street by day, but had driven out regularly every night, after dark.

This had raised the boy's curiosity, and he had followed one of these mysterious journeys. It had ended in a fine-looking house in a secluded street.

"What goes on in that house?" remarked the policeman, to whom Joe had addressed this question. "Nothing for boys."

"What fur men, then? Is it a faro den?"

"You're a cute one, boy. You've hit it. Leastways we think so. But policemen can't do anything on a think-so."

"Just as I had a notion," said Joe to himself, as he turned away. "He's bit my tiger. Can't let him alone. Got to be dabblin'. All right, Skinny, but if I ain't off my eggs your rope's gettin' short."

When the master of the mansion left his carriage on the evening in question he was informed by the servant that there was a person waiting to see him.

"Why did you let him in?" he angrily demanded. "Is that the way you obey orders? I am at home to nobody."

"I told him that. Couldn't keep him out without kicking him out."

"Then kick him out. I won't have my house invaded."

"It's only a boy. A little fellow. Said you'd be mighty glad to see him."

"A boy!" He hesitated. "A boy! Can it be— Where is he?"

"In the sitting-room up-stairs."

"Very well. I will see this intruder. Do you keep within hearing. Call in the coachman. I may need him. Boys are not always to be trusted in these times."

He made his way up the stairs, a little disturbed in his mind. Who could this youthful visitor be? Was it, by any chance, the vagrant, Jolly Joe?

Wetmore, for it was he, set his teeth firmly. If the boy had tracked him here it might be well to put an end to his tracking.

He flung open the door of the luxuriously furnished sitting-room. A youthful figure was balanced on a corner of one of its most richly covered chairs. Wetmore walked quickly to the chandeller, turned up a gas-jet, and looked down at his visitor.

"Guess you've see'd me afore," said the youth. "It's me. Jolly Joe Jorum. Jist dropped in to see how things was goin'."

"Joe Jorum?" cried the merchant, with an evil look in his eyes. "I don't know you. What do you want here?"

"Nothin' but a chat over old times. Think I don't know you? Them mustaches and whiskers mought fool some folks, but can't come in on me. Lawsee, I wouldn't go through Chicago 'thout stoppin' to see you. Ain't furgot the gay times we used to have in the old faro bank."

The merchant seated himself heavily. His face had grown very pale. It was evident that, in spite of all his precautions, he had been tracked.

What was to be done? Was it the boy alone that had tracked him? He knew Joe's character well enough to know that he would take dangerous risks. If the boy was alone all might be safe yet. To dispose of him and take to flight again. It was an easy game to play.

"Jolly Joe, I remember you now," he remarked, as if with renewed recollection. "You are the boy that came begging at my back door."

"And as got cotched in a fox-trap," supplied Joe, with a wink. "Couldn't hold this coon though."

"How did you know I was here?"

"See'd you," answered Joe, with another wink. "Arter I got away from that Ohio fox-trap I slipped on a train and stole a ride out here. Goin' to make my fortune, I am. See'd you to-night gittin' in yer carriage. Couldn't fool this chicken with them there whiskers. When I see a feller onc't, that feller's nailed. Jist dropped in to wait. 'Cause you owe me a lift, you know."

"You lie, you young rascal! You have been spying me. Have you sent word to anybody that I am here? The truth now. I will cut your tongue out if you lie to me."

"Goin' to send word to-morrer," answered Joe coolly. "Ther's some folks as 'd like to know where you're hidin'. Thought I'd call fu'st, though, and strike you fur a lift. Kinder short o' cash, and if you pony down handsome I moughtn't send word."

"You'll bribe me, you young rascal, will you?" With assumed fury the merchant caught him by the collar and shook him soundly. "You have sent word, I say! Lie to me at your peril!"

"I'll lie if you want me to right bad; but I don't like to. Kinder like to stick to the truth. Suits my constitution better."

"You hound! Are you telling the truth or not?"

"Tryin' to. Sometimes, though, the truth gits twisted round into a lie afore a feller knows it."

The merchant looked at him keenly. But nothing could be made of Joe's impassive face. He turned and gave a sharp pull at the bell.

"What you doin' that fur?" queried Joe. "If ye'r' goin' to order up cake an' ice cream, I'm yer hoss. But I don't want to be set down on by no gum game."

Wetmore gave no answer. He seated himself while waiting the answer to his summons. It came in the shape of two men who had been warned to be ready, the house-servant and the coachman.

"Here, men," cried Wetmore, harshly. "Take this impudent young hound and lock him up. He has been impudent to me, and I intend to teach him a lesson for it."

"Oh, now come, judge," exclaimed Joe, with a show of consternation. "Now that ain't on the square, nohow. I on'y said—"

"Away with him, fellows," rejoined Wetmore. "Don't stop to hear him talk. And see that he's locked up safely. You shall answer to me if he escapes you."

They caught Joe by the shoulders and raised him to his feet. He made no resistance.

"Tain't square, judge. I'll stick ter that. You'd best let me slide or I'll make things howl, now you bet."

"Off with him," cried Wetmore.

"All right. But you've got hold of a June bug, old Skinny. Jist you look out."

The two men dragged the unresisting boy rapidly across the room to a door that led from it on the left. There were three such doors besides the one leading from the stairs.

They had flung this door open, and were about to drag their prisoner through it, when they suddenly halted and stepped back before a person who appeared in the doorway.

They had reason to be startled, for this person held a pistol, which was pointed in an uncomfortable fashion toward them.

"Don't get scared," he softly said. "It won't go off if you keep right quiet. I'm Jack Bledsoe, that maybe you've heard of. You needn't get into no stew about that boy. I've stepped round to look after him."

Wetmore had fallen back in pallid consternation at this unlooked-for vision. He now started up in a fury.

"I know you, you blackleg! How dare you intrude into my house? Leave here this instant, or I'll have you flung from the windows! Run for a policeman, Ralph. We will see if there's law in Chicago."

"Don't run, Ralph. You'd best walk very slow. And take care of the handle of that door. There's an electric wire from it to this pistol. If you turn the handle the pistol might go off, and then somebody might get hurt."

Joe, who had been released, broke into a fit of laughter, so hearty, that he dropped back into a chair.

"What you think o' that, Skinny? Told you I'd make things howl. Kind of a Jack-in-a-box,

ain't it? You tech the door, and out pops Jack. Lawsee, it's fun."

"By Heaven, I won't stand this!" screamed the infuriated merchant. "If you men are scared by that braggart's pistol, I am not. I will take the boy myself."

He grasped Joe by the collar, and ran across the room to an opposite door, dragging his captive behind him.

He flung this door open with a clang, and was about to rush into the room beyond, when he suddenly retreated, with more haste than his servants had done.

For in the open doorway stood a second person, a middle-aged, well-dressed man, with a very severe expression of countenance.

"Another Jack-in-a-box," yelled Joe, with a second scream of laughter.

"Brown!" cried the discomfited villain.

"Just so. Brown, of the firm of Wetmore, Brown & Co. I don't want to interrupt your little pleasure trip, but I'll trouble you for a trifle of a hundred thousand dollars, which you owe the firm."

He stepped forward into the room, while the unmasked villain retreated step by step before him, as if from a ghost.

"Some notes coming due, you see," remarked Jack. "No funds to take them up. Thought he'd drop out and give you a call."

"My, ain't it prime!" ejaculated Joe, stooping with his hands on his knees, as he looked quizzically up into the pallid face of the runaway.

"Ruined!" groaned the latter. "The fiends take you all! But there's one hope."

He darted hastily across to the third door of the room. No one stirred to stop him. He flung the door open in mad haste; but recoiled with more consternation than before.

"Jill-in-the-box this time," cried Joe. "Two Jacks and a Jill, hey, Skinny!"

There in the doorway stood a woman's form, with the pretty face of Maud Weatherly, which was now very severe and grave as she looked in the dismayed face of her uncle.

She stepped out into the room.

"I can spare you, uncle," she said. "I hardly think your absence will be much loss. But I am not ready to spare my fortune, which I must request you to leave behind."

Wetmore glared with staring eyes from one to the other of the three persons, who had appeared as if by magic. He fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out the sight of specters. Then he leaped up like a madman and sprung wildly at Joe, who was standing directly before him.

"It is you, you gutter-rat, I have to thank for this! Take that!"

He struck fiercely with a heavy paper-weight which he had snatched from the table. But Joe was too quick for this murderous blow. In an instant he had darted past the infuriated man, and under the table.

The maddened villain turned to his niece, with a deadly fury still glaring in his eyes.

But at the same instant a shrill whistle rung through the room, and two men in the garb of policemen ran out of an adjoining apartment.

"Snatch him!" cried Jack. "He is dangerous."

The officers obeyed this order, and forced their prisoner into a chair, where, after a moment's struggle, he fell back conquered, in an utterly humbled and crushed attitude.

"That's the end of our little game," cried Joe, triumphantly. "You played it well, Skinny, but us chaps know somethin' 'bout faro. 'Tain't the fu'st time we've coppered the bet on you. Had yer front door all right, didn't you? But I jist slipped those folks in through the kitchen. Molly's my right bower, you know. Pass over the plunder, judge. We don't want yer carcass, but we want the cash orful bad."

Wetmore made no reply. He was utterly crushed and heartbroken. At a sign from Mr. Brown the officers removed him from the room, while the others held a conference as to the best steps to pursue.

It is not necessary to dwell at length on what followed. Joe's scheme had been completely successful, and its dramatic termination had taken all the starch out of the entrapped defaulter.

He was very glad to hand over his ill-gotten plunder on a promise of personal liberty, and a stay of legal proceedings. After returning to Mr. Brown and his niece what he had robbed them of he had still some thousands left, and with that he started further West, while they returned East with their recovered wealth, though not forgetting to pay Molly the sum that Joe had so liberally promised.

Two days afterward Mr. Brown met the creditors of the firm of Wetmore, Brown & Co., with a smiling face.

"Have you your bills, gentlemen? I am prepared to settle in full. I have opened the store again this morning, and am ready to run again at full speed."

"Then why in the world did you suspend?" asked one of the amazed creditors.

"Simply that the funds of the firm had got into a rat-hole. But we have opened the hole at the other end, and let them out again."

Meanwhile bold Jack Bledsoe was not left without his thanks from Maud Weatherly. Very warm thanks some would have thought. But Jack was wide awake enough to see through a pine plank, and he prosecuted his acquaintance with the fair Maud with such ardor that it was not long before rumors of an engagement got afloat.

And they were this time well-founded. The gallant Westerner had wooed and won Maud and her fortune which he had done so much to save.

During all these events Joe Jorum had become Jolly Joe more truly than ever.

Mr. Brown was very anxious to take him into his store, but Maud was determined he should first have an education. So arrangements were made to send Joe away to school, where the rough edge of his character might be rubbed off, and the sterling gold of his inner nature be made clear.

"Don't keer much what you do with me," said Joe, "so's there's plenty o' grub. Come to the conclusion that grub's the spice of life. There's a good many other things wu'th havin', but no feller kin enjoy 'em 'cept he's got suthin' inside him. I know that, 'cause I've been there."

So Joe was sent away to school, and there he still is, more devoted to grub than to learning, we must allow. Yet he is taking in the latter at a very fair rate, and promises to be a creditable scholar, and a useful member of society, before many more years roll round.

THE END.

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